

# Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

## Shabbat



### Context

*Shabbat has been described as Judaism's gift to the world, framing the working week with time for prayer, contemplation, and community. In the modern world where we have more 'leisure' time than many of the generations before us, we also face huge demands from the realms of work, consumption and over-programmed diaries. Shabbat is an opportunity to create balance in our week, in our lives, and in our relationships. It can be seen as an essential Sanctuary in Time<sup>1</sup> or as a radical statement about how we can better engage with each other, commerce and the environment.*

*In this essay by **Rabbi Jackie Tabick**, Convener of the Reform Bet Din (court), we are offered a glimpse into how she has made personal choices to ensure Shabbat is a transformative space in time for her and her family. We also get a sense of the hard work this can involve if we are to truly claim we have made our own informed decisions about our Shabbat observance, and place that within a communal context.*

### Content

Friday afternoon. I am racing around trying to ensure that dinner is ready; that I have prepared food for tomorrow's lunch; that I have answered all the urgent emails and phone calls (actually, that's an impossibility) and finished my sermon and teaching notes; that I have changed into some decent clothes and slapped some make-up on my face, tidied the house and laid the table. Then, as the sun sets, I call time; turn off the computer and my mobile, light the candles and experience the Star Trek moment. If the system works, I am transported to another time and place: Shabbat.

It all sounds so simple, but of course life is never that. I am not sure I would even want it to be that simple. As a Reform Jew, I have not signed up to a system where all the decisions were made for me long ago when the majority of Jews lived in small, compact communities where life styles and job opportunities for women were limited and the incredible possibilities posed by modern technology would have been classified as possible only through magic. I like living in our open society. I enjoy the challenges of a profession that not that long ago was forbidden to women, even if that means that I often have to light the Shabbat candles long after sunset. I want to be able to enhance my Shabbat through the selective use of technology. I want to make my own spiritual and ritual decisions.

So, for a committed Reform Jew, deciding how to celebrate Shabbat is no simple business. We teach that individuals must decide how to structure their own religious patterns of behaviour. That inevitably will mean that there will be many different ways that people find to express their Judaism. Crucially though, balanced against that very individualistic stance, is our respect for tradition with its multitude of clearly defined mitzvot.

Many Reform Jews believe that something special did happen at Mt Sinai, or, that at least, the story that something happened there has become part of our religious vocabulary. So we have to consider the values and rituals that emanate from Sinai and develop a relationship with the mitzvot that will make them our own.

Then of course the needs of community have to be considered. If most of us decide that staying in bed every Shabbat morning for a 'duvet service' is the correct way to celebrate Shabbat, then could synagogues continue to offer support for those who value communal worship or who need to celebrate or to mourn with their congregation? Could we pass on to future generations our rich religious heritage without any observance of Shabbat? A vital question confronts parents: do we want/expect our children to be footballers or pianists or Jews? The answer to that question must influence our family and individual choices for Shabbat.

So how do we make decisions? Reform Judaism teaches us that decisions should be made through study and commitment; through identifying the underlying values of the traditional mitzvot and then, with integrity, seeing how they might be brought into our own lives. Obviously, doing what is convenient for ourselves, or our families, is always a factor, but convenience cannot be the only criterion to be considered. As Reform Jews, we are expected to also embrace a sense of responsibility to our community, our history and above all, to our future.

So what are those values? We are taught that we have to ‘remember’ and ‘observe’ Shabbat<sup>ii</sup>, to abstain from work, to make the Shabbat holy, take time to really be with family and friends and to have fun.

When I was a teenager, I used to spend Friday evenings engaged in the arts and crafts I never found time for during the school week. I certainly did not do any homework. I know others who spend much of Shabbat gardening or cooking, or going to watch their football team. Somehow, apart from the workaholics amongst us, and of course those anxious to keep their jobs or forward their careers in these difficult times, abstaining from work is perhaps the easiest value to espouse.

What about *kedushah*, holiness? Where does God fit into our Shabbat lives? Is it sufficient to light Shabbat candles and make Kiddush on Friday evening with family and friends? Or should we remember that Shabbat traditionally has lasted till nightfall the next day and that it is important to give the day proper boundaries? What time and energy are we giving to studying Torah, worshipping in community or addressing our spiritual questions? Is listening into a streamed service a convenience or a blessed opportunity to allow the sick, disabled or the absent to enjoy contact and prayer with community? Is getting into a car to drive to synagogue or to visit family acceptable? Is it also acceptable to use the car to go shopping or to drive to your holiday destination? What about the many singles amongst us, especially the ill and the elderly, are we devoting enough resources to help them enjoy Shabbat? And how can we advise the many interfaith families in our communities to honour both their parents in a holy manner? Can our synagogues evolve to become an extended family for those who are lonely and can it provide Shabbat joy with friendship and warmth?

We might, sometimes, remember Shabbat but forget the equal importance of observing it. We declare we can choose how to observe the seventh day, but I worry that the questions that lie behind our choices have become irrelevant to so many.

We know that over the centuries Jewish traditions have changed and evolved to answer new spiritual, technological and societal challenges and we welcome the freedom as Reform Jews to address these issues. However, we must never forget that with freedom comes responsibility. There is a danger that Jewish life in our communities does not dissipate through conscious choice, but instead through the growth of apathy. The drip, drip drip effect. And that would be such a shame because then, how can we ask to be beamed up to enjoy our own Star Trek moment of Shabbat rest, renewal, joy and holiness?

## ***Contemplation***

*Reform Judaism recognises the possibility of different ways of marking Shabbat. We are not bound by the definition of work received from the rabbis in their search for detail within our texts (though we may choose, as some Reform Jews do, to embrace it). Nor are we exempt from the Torah’s obligation to avoid ‘work’, and to rest. Thus, each of us faces a challenge in our religious lives – to find our own definition of work and rest, to ensure that we are fulfilling Shabbat. And similarly, we are challenged to find our own approach to the positive ritual observance of this special day – for ourselves, with our families and communities.*

*What is Shabbat able to be for us? How do we mark it? What do we choose to refrain from doing to make the day both restful and meaningful, a Sanctuary in Time?*

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<sup>i</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Sabbath”, 1951.

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 20:8, Deuteronomy 5:12