

Keeping Shabbat

Summary: In the Jewish calendar, Shabbat (also called the Sabbath) begins at sunset on Fridays and ends at sunset on Saturdays. Jews traditionally “keep” the Sabbath by resting and refraining from labor. They instead share meals and rituals with family, study, and attend synagogue services.

“The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals,” wrote Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book *The Sabbath* (1951). When the word “holiness” first appears in the Bible, it is not to pronounce the holiness of a mountain, a temple, or an altar, but the holiness of a day. In the absence of permanent structures during generations of Jewish exile and genocide, sacred time has become essential to the Jewish tradition. In Genesis 2:3 it is written, “And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” The injunction to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy is one of the Ten Commandments. As Heschel observed, the Sabbath is a temple in time, a holiness built into every week.

In the Jewish calendar, Shabbat (or Sabbath) begins at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday. By lighting candles and saying the appropriate blessings over the wine and bread at sunset on Friday, Jews enter into this temple in time. Keeping Shabbat by refraining from all labor for the next 24 hours, Jews celebrate this gift of time with family and community. In today’s world, where the rush of work and the pursuit of worldly gain can easily consume seven days a week, many Jews treasure this time to stop, to observe quiet and study, and to nurture the soul. People greet one another with the words “*Shabbat Shalom*” (“Sabbath peace”), for Shabbat is a day of peace in an often turbulent world. As Blu Greenberg wrote in *How to Run An Orthodox Jewish Household* (1983), “Immediately after I light my candles, it is as if I flicked a switch that turned Shabbat on in the world, even though I know very well the world is not turned on to Shabbat. Remarkable as this experience is, even more remarkable is that it happens every seventh day of my life... [It is] a gift and a responsibility. Without it I could not live.”

On a Friday night in Kansas City, Missouri, members of an Orthodox family gather in their home to welcome Shabbat with a traditional meal. As evening falls, just before Shabbat begins, the wife, assisted

by her two daughters, lights two Sabbath candles, representing the injunctions to remember the Sabbath and to keep the Sabbath holy. The dining table has been set for dinner, and on the white tablecloth are the wine cup and two loaves of challah, the special braided bread, covered with an embroidered cloth. As the family gathers around the table, the father blesses each of the three children and then recites the *kiddush*, or blessing over the wine, recalling how God rested from the work of creation after the sixth day, sanctifying the Sabbath. All have a sip of the wine and then adjourn to ritually wash their hands, pouring water first over the right hand and then the left. Gathering again in silence around the table, they recite the blessing over the challah: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” Each receives a slice of challah, and the meal begins. The family lingers over this Friday night meal, singing special Shabbat table songs called *zemirot* and concluding the meal with a grace offered by the father.

On Shabbat, Jews are commanded to rest and rejoice, to refrain from mundane concerns, and to avoid work. Depending upon one’s interpretation or level of observance, refraining from “mundane concerns” or “work” can mean different things. For less observant Jews, Shabbat is simply a day of relaxation, a time to be with friends and family, sharing a meal together and staying at home. For the more orthodox, Shabbat is a day spent in study and prayer, in which any “work” such as driving, using electricity, writing, or cooking are completely forbidden.

How literally the commandments of Shabbat are to be followed is extensively debated in the Talmud and remains the subject of lively debate and discussion. For example, in extreme cold weather, is it better to drive to the synagogue and break a commandment, or to not go at all and miss the services? In 21st century America, there are many societal pressures that make it challenging to keep Shabbat at all. Most businesses in America remain open on Saturdays, and school events, baseball games, dance lessons, and recitals are often scheduled over Friday nights and Saturday mornings. For many Jews, choosing to keep Shabbat can feel as difficult as it is rewarding.

For this Orthodox family in Kansas City, keeping Shabbat means not only refraining from business or homework, but not driving a car, not turning electricity on or off, not cooking, not gardening, not writing, and not handling money. They walk back and forth to the synagogue on Saturday morning. For

their meals, they use a special hot plate to keep food warm from the time it is prepared before sundown on Friday until it is eaten during Shabbat.

When Shabbat is over on Saturday evening, another ceremony is held called *havdalah*, or “separation,” marking the end of this sacred time and the entry back into the workweek. *Havdalah* is observed in the home, where a cup of wine is filled to overflowing for a final blessing. Sweet-smelling spices are sniffed as a reminder of the fragrance of the holy day now past. A special multi-wicked braided candle is lit, and all present extend their fingers toward the flame as the blessing is recited. Looking at the reflection of the *havdalah* candle's light in their hands, the family ponders the mirroring of this Sabbath light in the hands that will shape the week ahead. After a final blessing, the candle is extinguished with a bit of the wine and these words: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who distinguishes holy time from mundane time, light from dark, Israel from the nations, the seventh day from six days of labor.”

Today Jews have created alternative blessings, expressing both the distinctiveness and relatedness of Shabbat and the rest of one's life. In *The Book of Blessings*, author Marcia Falk offers the following: “Let us distinguish parts within the whole and bless their differences. Like the Sabbath and the six days of creation, may our lives be made whole through relation. As rest makes the Sabbath precious, may our work give meaning to the week. Let us separate the Sabbath from other days of the week, seeking holiness in each.”