

The Sabbath as Dialectic: Implications for Mental Health

ALAN D. GOLDBERG

ABSTRACT: Jewish tradition established the Sabbath as a special day. Its observance was both part of a religious tradition and an example of psychological health. This article explores the values and attitudes that underlie Sabbath observance, identifies some of the themes and behaviors most characteristic of these observances, and relates these to current mental health practices.

Throughout history, the Sabbath has been recognized as Judaism's central unifying symbol and defining characteristic, embodying its most basic ideals and values.¹ In enunciating the principle that all individuals have the right to weekly rest, the Sabbath commandments established a standard for human dignity that has had widespread impact on the social and political consciousness of Western civilization. Recently, the insights and guides to behavior provided by the Sabbath have been extended to the field of mental health. For example, Golner has drawn a parallel between the Sabbath and specific family life intervention strategies;² Ziff has linked Sabbath ritual to the promotion of healthy personality growth and development;³ and Fromm, Cox, and Gordis, each writing from a different perspective, have identified the potential of a revitalized Sabbath to act as a positive counterforce to the dangers created by the mechanization and industrialization of contemporary life.⁴ For Gordis, the connection between the Sabbath and mental health is unambiguous:

As tensions continue to mount in contemporary society the traditional Sabbath, that requires an all-but-total separation from work-a-day tasks and concerns and worry, becomes a . . . precious resource for life.⁵

The recognition of a link between the Sabbath and mental health comes at a time when apparent deficiencies in the existing models for delivery of mental health services have led to a search for viable alternatives.⁶ In several respects there are distinct parallels between the primary prevention model proposed by Cowen as one solution to existing mental health problems and the Sabbath. According to Cowen, primary prevention programs are intended to enhance the psychological well-being of those exposed to them and differ from remedial programs in that they are: (a) intended for groups of well people (not solely for individuals with identifiable psychological problems) or for those at psychological risk because of their current life situations; (b) aimed at promoting wellness and therefore before the fact of maladjustment; and (c)

Alan D. Goldberg is Associate Professor of Counseling Education at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York.

supported by a knowledge base that validates the program's adjustment-enhancing rationale.⁷

Throughout Jewish history the Sabbath has been not merely an abstract theological concept and a legal institution but, more important, a concrete fact of Jewish life and an integral part of the social order. The manner of its observance has always been one of the major concerns of Rabbinic Judaism. However, much of its psychological significance rests with the underlying assumption that adherence to its rituals and sensitivity to its values would make people's lives more fulfilling.

There is little question that the Sabbath commandments explicitly extend the obligation to rest to every member of the community. On the Sabbath no one is to work, whether family member, servant, animal, or stranger. Part of the normal cycle of every week, the impact of the Sabbath is not time-limited. Moreover, since its observance is not dependent either on one's geographic locale or socio-economic situation, it is continually available to everyone: those not yet experiencing significant problems as well as those undergoing difficult life stage transitions. Consequently, the Sabbath, by regularly providing every member of the community with an opportunity for rest from physical strain and psychic stress,⁸ and by giving "birth to that joy of life in which man gains strength from the fulfillment of every task,"⁹ is an apt symbol of value continuity, stability, and support for people living in a highly mobile society.

In addition, the Sabbath reintroduces a rhythm into the cycle of everyday life which restores "the lost dialectic of action and response, of interaction and letting be."¹⁰ Heschel's observation that the Sabbath "cannot survive in exile, a lonely stranger, it needs the companionship of all the other days,"¹¹ poetically captures the Sabbath motif in which the world is understood as a coherent and interrelated whole. From this perspective it is not the distinctions among constructs that demand our attention but the acknowledgement and appreciation of their dynamic unity.¹² The remainder of this paper will examine several of the values, attitudes, and practices manifested by the Sabbath and explore their relevance for and relationship to some of our current mental health concerns.

Work and rest

"Six days you shall labor and do all your work but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God: You shall not do any work."¹³ The most obvious Sabbath dialogue is between the mandated work of the week and the commandment to rest on the Sabbath. The negative connotations frequently associated with work are in direct contrast to Jewish tradition in which work was never something to be avoided. Rather, work, whether called job, career, or profession, was seen as an act with intrinsic value essential to the life of every human being and mandated for every person within the community. The Rabbis, however, also recognized the dangers inherent in the necessary and continuing struggle that individuals must undertake to survive in and master their environment.

First, man paradoxically tends to become dependent upon the very instruments he has fashioned to free and serve him. . . . Second, the danger is very real in modern industrial society that man, as worker, becomes de-personalized and functions merely as a human cog in a vast assembly line. Above all, however, there is the opposite danger . . . that man, aware of his power and success in dominating nature, will begin to regard himself as the measure of what is right and the yardstick of the good.¹⁴

Unfortunately, these fears have not been unfounded. Over the years work, both as personal ethic and societal virtue, became a pre-eminent factor in organizing people's lives, establishing their personal identities, and influencing their psychological health, often leaving little time for personal growth and family interaction.¹⁵ However, the technological accomplishments of the past decade have often negated the ability of work to continue to satisfy our needs for personal dignity, achievement, and a sense of self-worth.¹⁶ It is not surprising, therefore, that for many leisure has replaced work as an important source of personal value and fulfillment. In the process the distinctions between the Sabbath and the other days of the week have become blurred, and much of our leisure time has become remarkably similar to our working time: devoted to hectic activity which often leaves us equally as exhausted and unfulfilled as work.

In contrast, the Sabbath defined non-work time as "kodesh," holy. For Heschel, it is the emphasis on time which is the essence of the Sabbath. However, the time of which Heschel speaks does not accrue to one as a result of hard work. It is time subject to specific behavioral guidelines and not self-determined, discretionary, or personally disposable. It is time to be spent in deepening interpersonal relationships; reestablishing contact with the world of nature; expressing the emotional dimensions of our being; and enjoying the "here and now."¹⁷

If not for the Sabbath, when would you rest, when would you come to your self, come to your wife and child, when would you attend to your mind and spirit . . . ? "When you have time to spare?"—but when will you have time, when would you dare have some to spare?¹⁸

In emphasizing the harmony between the individual and nature, Sabbath rest promoted those activities that fostered disidentification with the struggles for material survival and the self as do-er and enhanced awareness of the self as be-er.¹⁹

Today, perhaps more than ever before, it is important to realize that both work and leisure

contribute to individual development and well-being . . . and combine to elaborate a life style that supports the health, continued intellectual development and psychological well-being of the individual and the enhancement of society.²⁰

It is important, however, to distinguish between the harmonizing potential of Sabbath rest and the activity-oriented focus of leisure. While

acknowledging the importance of both, Fromm and Gordis each rejected the possibility that a single day could serve both ends, and considered two non-work days essential: one devoted to "contemplation, reading, meaningful conversation . . . completely free from all practical and mundane concerns,"²¹ and the other devoted to activities which would meet the legitimate interests of people but which were prohibited by the traditional Sabbath code.²²

Individual and community

One hallmark of modern life is that we are confronted with an almost limitless number of choices, "from the most trivial choices between competing commodities to far reaching alternatives in lifestyle."²³ While the increased potential for social diversity may have dramatically increased the number of lifestyle choices and opportunities available for self-fulfillment, the freedom to do almost anything still leaves many people chronically unfulfilled.²⁴ In the face of a growing emphasis on personal choice, such values as self-realization, autonomy, and individualism often have become transformed into preoccupation with the isolated self and self-indulgence.²⁵ Estrangement and alienation from one's family and community have become one symptom of this process, with individuals often entering counseling in an attempt to find a cure for their feelings of isolation and loneliness.²⁶

The norms and behavioral guidelines for traditional Sabbath observance which emphasize the family meal and common worship and prohibit riding and work, return the individual, physically and psychologically, to the family and an intimate, close-knit community. The poet Bialek captures the attachment to home and community:

We've welcomed the Sabbath with songs and with praise;
With joy in our hearts wend homeward our ways.
The table is set and the candles alight.
At home every corner is sparkling and bright.²⁷

The leisurely evening provides a regular opportunity for family members to become reacquainted with one another and their neighbors, to find the security often sought from the therapeutic environment, and to realize that there are others to whom one matters and with whom one can share the events and emotions of the week. Cowan describes the supportive potential of the Sabbath at a time when his family life was in transition and his children needed family stability and psychological security.

Shabbos, with its rituals, its certainty of a full evening together every Friday . . . seemed like one embodiment of stability, one steady way of quieting the kids' fears and drawing us closer together as a family.²⁸

One of the unfortunate consequences of the late Friday evening service so common in many American Conservative and Reform synagogues is that it shifts the focus of the evening from the home to the synagogue. What began as

an accommodation to the economics of survival in a new land now seems part of a general trend toward institutionalizing religion and its celebrations.²⁹

Participation in the regular Sabbath activities of the community (for example, common worship, study groups) also places people in contact with a support network that can provide numerous opportunities for social-emotional support, personal identity, and meaning. Both Pargament and McGuire identify the importance of the specifically religious elements within these activities in developing coping behaviors for responding to emotionally and physically debilitating situations as well as providing significant insights into the human condition and the relationships of people to one another.³⁰

Recently, in an effort to reconcile traditional Jewish law with the advances of modern technology and contemporary patterns of suburban living, Sigal has recommended relaxing some of the traditional restrictions on travel to permit such activities as visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, and visiting parents and children.³¹ In another attempt to create an environment responsive to the needs for community, some synagogues have drawn on the Jewish counterculture of the 1960s and established "havurot" (religious fellowships) as mediating structures to facilitate interaction between the family and the community. These involve bringing together small numbers of individuals and/or families who provide a personal context for regular worship and study, a supportive environment in which to attempt to modify one's lifestyle, and a close-knit community of care for mutual support in time of need.³²

Masculine and feminine

Come my beloved, with chorus of praise;
Welcome Bride Sabbath, the Queen of the days.³³

The personification of the Sabbath as bride and queen in the hymn, *Lechoh Dodi*, which has become a regular part of the introduction to the Friday evening service, expresses the joyous and feminine aspects of the evening. The pace of the evening is leisurely; the mood is one of love and devotion addressing the sensual and intuitive aspects of our being. Gilligan has observed that personal autonomy, mastery, and work historically have been associated with men, while women are more likely to manifest the values of intimacy, expressiveness, and relationship.³⁴ Her observations suggest that the feminine motifs of Friday evening may be neither accidental nor merely poetic. While productive labor has created the comforts of modern living, it has also created a lifestyle dominated by "the separateness of the individual self over connection to others . . . leaning more toward an autonomous life of work than toward the interdependence of love and care."³⁵ Friday evening ushers in one opportunity to reverse this trend by validating interpersonal expressiveness and interrelatedness over mastery.

Being and doing

Keep and Remember!—in one divine world

He that is One, made His will heard . . .³⁶ According to tradition, both forms of the Sabbath Commandment—"Remember the Sabbath day" and "Observe the Sabbath day"—were communicated simultaneously. In these two complementary commandments the inward and cognitive act of remembering and the outward and behavioral patterns of conduct are linked. The psychological importance of the weekly act of disengaging should not be underestimated. While the prescribed and repetitive rituals that characterize the Sabbath frequently seem onerous and less authentic than the spontaneity of the peak experiences so highly valued by contemporary psychologists, the occasional and unpredictable occurrence of the latter makes their impact on one's life negligible.³⁷ It is exactly the required weekly disengagement from everyday tasks and concerns, along with the acceptance of specified responsibilities, that is instrumental in facilitating movement toward internality and the belief that one can control thought, action, and emotion. The result is a sense of personal empowerment, both symbolic and concrete, which can have positive physical and psychological effects.³⁸

The process of disengagement from the ordinary activities of the week is made easier by the specification of the behaviors appropriate to the day. Recently, psychologists have realized that if such constructs as intentionality, personal competence, and self-efficacy³⁹ are to be more than abstractions it is necessary to identify those behaviors likely to enhance psychological well-being and personal effectiveness.⁴⁰ The Rabbis, however, also realized that psychological and religious health required consistency between one's inner life and outer actions. Neither rote prayer, the most meticulous performance of ritual, nor the acceptance of two non-work days can guarantee a healthier life. The underlying assumption in both cases is identical: to act in a health-promoting manner, just as to observe the Sabbath properly, requires both knowledge and action.

Conclusion

London has pointed out that many of the psychological problems people currently experience are remarkably similar to those faced by earlier generations in that they are "concerned with what life means and how we ought to live it."⁴¹ If the problems we face are not so different from those faced by earlier generations, perhaps those of us concerned with psychological change should seriously consider Harvey's suggestion that principles and paradigms once proposed may still contain insights applicable to our current life situations.⁴² From this vantage point, there is much that mental health practitioners, regardless of their personal religious orientation, may learn from an understanding of the values and rituals associated with the Sabbath that can enhance our understanding of human nature and can be translated into concrete and useful knowledge.

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