



The Individual Spaces of Interpretation for the Collective Social Construction of the Jewish Sabbath in Israel

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Abstract

This study focuses on the tension between the national, public, and social restrictions that apply to the Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath) in Israel and the way that Jews from a variety of religious streams understand Shabbat as leisure time that allows for a subjective choice of practices and self-realization. Jewish law provides clear rules and instructions for behavior on Shabbat, including a prohibition on different types of *melacha* (different kinds of creative activity), with the goal of “remembering” and “keeping” the Sabbath. While in Israel there are many Jews who do not follow these laws, they also make Shabbat special in other ways. Since Israel is a Jewish state, there is no clear separation between religion and state; today there are laws, regulations, expectations, and customs relating to Shabbat in the public sphere. To understand the diversity of views of Israelis about Shabbat, qualitative interviews were conducted with 66 secular, religious, formerly religious, traditional, and Ultra-Orthodox Jews, aged 25–50. Analysis of the survey data shows that Israeli Jews have a variety of perspectives regarding Shabbat, and do not describe Shabbat being structured and experienced as collective, homogeneous, and restrictive. Among the interviewees, religious and secular alike, Shabbat is described as a time full of variable subjective content, based on free choice and free from other obligations. On the one hand, even the religious and Ultra-Orthodox prioritize the individual and their family, sometimes more than religious faith or *halachic* obligation. On the other hand, even for those who do not keep the Shabbat *halachically*, resting on Shabbat forms an organizing principle for the weekend, lending this time its unique quality.

Keywords Shabbat · Israeli weekend · Religious streams in Israel

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Introduction

Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath) is the official Israeli weekend, in which there are several laws or local regulations that limit work, business opening hours, and public transport (Aronovsky and Sapir 2018; Sapir 2016; Tzameret 2004), and when most of the economy comes to a halt. On the one hand, the separation between the weekdays and the weekend is not unique to Israel. In the USA and the European Union, the workdays are usually Monday to Friday, with the weekend being more focused on recreation and many professions and organizations designating these days as work-free. On the other hand, throughout the world the weekend is undergoing a process of secularization, and while there are those who carry out religious practices and rituals during this time, others maintain regular weekday activities such as work or self-care (Glorieux et al. 2008; Shir-Wise 2018; Zuzanek 2014). As part of this process of secularization, over the last decade weekend work has become more common throughout Europe, and many countries have passed laws to regulate the Sunday opening hours of businesses (Jurun et al. 2020). In addition, while throughout the world it is agreed that cultural events, restaurants, and public transport will operate as usual on the weekend (Rizzica et al. 2020), in Israel there are frequently legal restrictions on these activities during Shabbat (Ben-Porat 2016). Another example is that of educational services such as libraries, which are open during the weekend in the USA and parts of Europe, while in Israel they are closed. As well as market and labor forces, social customs also shape the public space in Israel during the weekend (ibid). Over the course of Israel's history, Shabbat has been instilled with relevant national, social, and civic values for many Israeli Jews (Halamish 2004; Helman 2007; Tzameret 2004).

Despite the powerful social mechanisms that dictate the nature of Shabbat, one should not conclude that this day is observed, marked, or ritualized homogeneously. In practice, different groups act differently during the weekend and Shabbat, and while there are those who follow Jewish law, others see Shabbat as a time for the free consumption of leisure and movement and are ready to fight for their rights in these areas in the public sphere (Ben-Porat 2016; Ben-Porat and Feniger 2009). Accordingly, research of the experience of Jews in Israel over Shabbat repeatedly emphasizes the understanding of the Jewish Shabbat as a controversial sociopolitical space, with differences between religious (i.e., religiously Shabbat-observant people) and secular (i.e., those who may or not mark Shabbat culturally) (Friedman and Viner 2018). While scholarship dealing with Shabbat has expanded in recent years and has also begun debating its common practices (Ben-Porat and Feniger 2009), or the main rationales for observance (Aronovsky and Sapir 2022), the focus has been on specific population groups or cultural and *halachic* rationales for marking Shabbat, rather than the personal choices that people make regarding what to do on Shabbat. In contrast, this study examines the meanings ascribed to Shabbat by the broader Israeli–Jewish public, without comparison with Jewish communities worldwide or focusing on the differences between religious and secular Jews. This approach allows us to see what Israeli Jews have in common with regard to Shabbat.

In this study, I argue that, alongside the heated and justified debate about the nature of religious restrictions in a country that is both Jewish and democratic, there is another, individual dimension that needs exploring. This dimension provides a better understanding of the Shabbat experience of religious, secular, formerly religious, traditional, and Haredi Jews. It shows that they ascribe unique value to Shabbat, consciously and demonstrably distinguish it from the other days of the week, and carefully choose how to spend this window of time. While regular weekdays are subject to different constraints, Shabbat is a time free of disturbances that can be devoted to self-realization. Unlike the universal weekend, which is similar in content to the rest of the week (Glorieux et al. 2008; Shir-Wise 2018; Zuzanek 2014), Shabbat for Jews in Israel is a time for choosing different kinds of content, with an emphasis on family and rest. While these activities are not unique to Jews in Israel, here the separation between the weekday and Shabbat is much more pronounced and there are more significant preparations carried out to enjoy free choice on Shabbat to its fullest.

The Israeli Shabbat and the Global Weekend

The week serves as an organizing principle for the management and utilization of time, with the weekdays devoted to work and the weekend dedicated to leisure and holy time (Zerubavel 1985; 1989). Throughout the world one can see how the separation between workdays and rest days are understood as universal, synchronous, and connected to biological and natural processes. While days, months, and years have an astronomical explanation and are connected to the cycles of nature, the 7 days of the week cannot be explained in this way (Kreisel 2004; Zerubavel 1989). Throughout history, different cultures have adopted different lengths of the “week,” for example, 8 days in the Roman Empire (Kreisel 2004), 10 days in sixteenth-century France (following the Jacobite Rising), or 5 days in the Soviet Union (Zerubavel 1989: 30–40). Despite these exceptions, the 7-day week dominates because it plays an important role in the sources and institutions of the Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are arranged around the days of the week and sanctify one of these days (Kreisel 2004; Zerubavel 1989). Since religions lend broad legitimacy to social processes (Berger 2015; Gorski 2000), so too the week is organized in this familiar way today.

Despite the religious impact on the structure of the week, and although time is crucial for distinguishing between sacred and profane (Zerubavel 1985), conceptions of how people spend the weekend are not uniform and do not necessarily rely on religious traditions. Thus, according to studies conducted in Canada, the USA, Japan, the UK, Australia, and South Korea, adults tend to spend their weekends at home, at beaches and parks, with friends, engaging in light sports, dining out, and sleeping more (Kim & Chin 2015; Zuzanek 2014). However, around the world weekends are also becoming more like the other days of the week, with new digital possibilities allowing this time to be used for work and study, and leisure and self-care activities that were not previously carried out on weekends, for example,

visiting the hairdresser or gym (Glorieux et al. 2008; Shir-Wise 2018; Smithers et al. 2023; Zuzanek 2014).

For Orthodox Jews, there are restrictions on both work and leisure activities during Shabbat (Levi 2004; Lau 2004). Studies over the years reveal a stable picture according to which the recreational modes of Jews in Israel (across the entire spectrum of religious tendencies) are consistent with similar trends in other countries (Katz and Hass 2000; Shir-Wise 2016; Zerubavel 1989). According to these studies, Jews in Israel tend to devote the weekend to the family, eating a shared meal (mainly on Friday night), going out on trips, spending time with friends, reading and resting, visiting the sea or the pool, consuming culture, and going shopping (Ben-Porat 2016; Ben-Porat and Feniger 2009; Horowitz 2004; Katz and Hass 2000).

However, alongside the increasing secularization of the weekend and the similarity between the weekend in Israel and other countries, Israeli Jews still hold other meanings, which are drawn from the Jewish tradition. The Israeli commitment to Shabbat, alongside the institutional and non-institutional forces that preserve the character of private and public space on this day, lead to the strict and uncompromising maintenance of the difference between the start of the week and its end. That is, even if not all Jews in Israel keep the Shabbat *halachically*, they keep it culturally and socially, and attribute to this time a “different quality,” which usually entails different behavior.

Quantitative studies carried out in recent years also reflect the differences between the Israeli–Jewish Shabbat, in which traditional Jewish practices remain common, and the universal secularizing weekend. For example, 81% of Jews in Israel hold a “special meal on Shabbat eve,” 73% of Jews in Israel light Shabbat candles, (Levi 2004: 126), and 74% of Jews in Israel do not work on Shabbat (Ben-Porat 2016: 317; Katz and Hass 2000: 73; Levi 2004: 129). Moreover, most Jews in Israel perform at least one Jewish *halachic* symbolic practice during Shabbat (Ben-Porat 2016: 317; Katz and Gurvitz 1973; Levi 2004: 129). It is possible that Israeli Jews feel a certain degree of commitment to Jewish continuity and to the Jewish nature of Israeli society, even if selectively. Therefore, explains Levy (2001), certain traditions are preserved by many, while others—especially the “negative” commandments of Shabbat, for example, those that prohibit watching television or driving—are not kept by the majority. Identifying the individual dimension in creating the meaning of Shabbat demonstrates that the process of preserving tradition is not solely the result of top-down enforcement, but also stems from a conscious process, autonomous choice, and subjective interpretation that occurs in a bottom-up manner. While these elements incorporate accepted social constructs—such as the homogeneity, restrictions, and orthodoxy of Shabbat—they also preserve time devoted to free choice.

The Formation of the Shabbat in Israel as a Restrictive Time

In Judaism, the religious or *halachic* rationale for keeping Shabbat appears in the Book of Genesis, the Ten Commandments,¹ elsewhere in the Bible, and throughout later Jewish texts (Lau 2004). These references emphasize the importance of the Shabbat in Judaism; in contrast to other monotheistic religions, in Jewish law there are many laws that apply to Shabbat. These include “positive” commandments, whose goal is to actively observe the Shabbat, such as lighting candles, prayer, or *kiddush* on Shabbat eve, and “negative” commandments, whose goal is to preserve the honor of Shabbat by withholding from certain activities, such as the prohibition on traveling, using electricity, or cooking (Lau 2004; Levi 2004).

The Jewish laws of Shabbat do not only influence religious communities or those who follow *halacha*, but also the public space in Israel, where Shabbat is defined and shaped in accordance with the Jewish–Orthodox tradition. Issues that had previously been understood on a communal level, such as Shabbat, *kashrut*, conversion, or burial, now took on national significance, and the emerging establishment between 1945 and 1948 was required to make complex, sometimes incoherent, decisions in a variety of areas (Fisher 2013). The unique nature of the Israeli Shabbat was shaped by thinkers such as Ahad Ha’am with his famous saying “More than the Jewish People have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews” (Tzvi-Greenberg 1898, Chapter 10, 560), Haim Nahman Bialik (1934) and his secular Shabbat eves in Tel Aviv (1934/35), and Berl Katznelson (1917/18), with his understanding of the Shabbat as a cornerstone of Western culture. Despite differences of opinions among religious, secular, and traditional public figures in Mandatory Palestine, they all agreed to adopt the Shabbat as a national value (Tzameret 2004: 117) through processes that found formal and informal expression in the framework of the Shabbat (Helman 2007: 117) and have been mostly preserved until today. The Shabbat is protected in law, beginning with the Status Quo Agreement: a letter of agreements regarding the relations between Judaism and the state regarding important religious-*halachic* issues such as Shabbat, *kashrut*, or marriage, which was signed on 19 June 1947 by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and the rabbis Yehuda Fishman Maimon and Yitzhak Gruenbaum (Ben-Porat and Feniger 2009: 299). The first clause of the letter determined that the official day of rest in Israel would be Shabbat, while giving permission to other religions to mark the Sabbath on their own holy day (Tzameret 2004: 117). Over the years, this clause led to extensive legislation whose goal was to preserve the Shabbat in public spaces (Aronovsky and Sapir 2018; Sapir 2016), and laws that limit the areas of work, hours of work, and payment on Shabbat, even if these laws were not always fully enforced (Yahud and Finkelstein 2016). The limitations in the public sphere throughout Shabbat have become one of the most contested issues in Israeli society, reflecting the broader split that exists between the religious and the secular in Israel (Ben-Porat 2016).

¹ The first appears in the Book of Exodus 20:8—“Remember the Sabbath day—keep it holy”—while the second appears in the Book of Deuteronomy 5:12—“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you.” There are many other references to Shabbat in the Torah.

All these elements described above join formal and informal processes prevalent in the State of Israel that provide the Jewish Sabbath with its unique status. Usually, these mechanisms focus on a period of limitations and prohibitions typical of a state that does not have separation between religion and state, resulting in public conflicts surrounding Shabbat. However, in less formal settings Shabbat is experienced as a space of personal leisure and choice that reflects Jewish and Israeli culture and each person's unique cultural repertoire. As mentioned, despite the discourse of restrictions and prohibitions on a general level, on an individual level Shabbat is not understood as restrictive, but as a sacred time of freedom of choice. These gaps highlight the way in which, despite restrictions of culture, time, and language, there is a potential space of cultural consensus, which can be adopted differently by different communities.

Methodology

This is a qualitative phenomenological study that examines the daily experiences of the studied population on the basis of a narrative approach using knowledge gathered from several arenas in parallel (Marcus 1995). The goal of the phenomenological approach is to find meanings of the human experience via understanding the way in which the individuals who carry out the action experience and interpret it, from their private point of view, in accordance with their decisions and interactions with their surroundings on a daily level (Guba and Lincoln 1994). This is based on a narrative approach that exists in several arenas in parallel (multi-sited ethnography), whose goal is to examine a specific subject, or—in the current case—a specific framework of time, beyond the boundaries of a single researched community at any given time (Guzmen-Carmeli 2020). This process allows for a broader examination of ideas and symbols among different cultural groups, while creating an integrative discourse and comparison between these groups around the same framework of time. There were 66 participants in the study; 34 women and 32 men, aged 25–50, and Jewish citizens of Israel. The interviewees live throughout Israel, and they were chosen to reflect the variety of identities and religious/secular streams that exist in Israel. The interviewees provided oral consent to participate in the study, and their consent was recorded. Interviews were conducted in Hebrew. The author translated all quoted material presented in this paper, which was subsequently proofed by a professional editor.

The study was based on in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were held and analyzed according to the major themes that arose from the field. Through understanding the religious identity of the interviewees and the connection between their religious identity and behavior on Shabbat, differences and points of similarity could be identified between different sectors in relation to patterns of consuming time over Shabbat. The interviewees provided rich and detailed descriptions of the weekend and Shabbat. More than once, these experiences also included detailed descriptions of the activities of the community, nuclear family, or extended family. Since my research is phenomenological, focusing on subjective experiences, and because I did not include additional perspectives on family or community identity in the Shabbat

narrative, I am limited to describing a personal experience, even if it is described as a broader one. As I will show, there is a tension between the choice to keep Shabbat and its status as the main day of the week for free time. Understanding the meanings instilled in this tension is vital for understanding the desire to separate the secular and the profane, both in religious–*halachic* contexts and in broader social structures. This separation is based on shared values that lead to a separation between the weekdays and the weekend, most significantly rest and family.

The Tension Between the Concept of Shabbat as Restrictive Time and Free Time

Shabbat-observant interviewees said that the choice to keep Shabbat was based on a desire to distinguish it from the other days of the week, even if this resulted in certain costs. Whether the person had kept Shabbat since childhood or started doing so at a later stage, they understood the practice as an autonomous choice rather than something that was forced on them by their family or community. The most inflexible expression of the meaning of Shabbat in the religious world is expressed by Yosef, a 25-year-old *yeshiva* student from Ofakim, who describes breaking Shabbat as a “desecration.” In his words:

It’s true that I’ve never broken Shabbat, so I don’t know how it feels and what it actually involves. But there’s something about keeping Shabbat that you know beforehand that now you won’t know anything [that happens] over the next 25 hours. And the entirety of your being is in the place where you are... here’s something about this observation that I would never abandon. I think that Shabbat is really a genius creation by God, by the Torah, and I would never give it up in exchange for going to the sea or listening to music.

Yosef describes the optimal structure of Shabbat for an Ultra-Orthodox person, and the way in which he finds his spiritual quiet, which results in thanks to God for Shabbat—the “genius creation” that allows complete disconnection. For 25 hours there are significant restrictions on a person’s conduct, but Yosef is thankful for the experience. He struggles to think of something it would be worth desecrating Shabbat for—for him, being unable to go to the sea or listen to music is not a limitation, but frees up time for more important activities. Although not many interviewees would agree with Yosef’s comments, a few also expressed the need for a communal framework in relation to Shabbat. For example, Menachem, a 30-year-old national religious teacher who now observes Shabbat after many years of not doing so:

Recently, now that I’m more settled in my views and don’t follow one herd or another, I found that complete disconnection is right for me. Because in my work I’m all the time on the telephone... there’s some kind of statement in the fact that I don’t answer the phone on Shabbat, which allows me to leave everything on the outside and to stay in the four walls of my house with those who are with me now at home. They’re the most important people to me... Why not watch television and why not watch a film on Friday night? I don’t have a good

answer. I'm not trying to convince myself; I just accept it as quiet and that's what occupies me.

Menachem explains that his choice is an afterthought, one that is not subject to social pressures: "what's right for me." In the past he was more secular, and even during the interview he described his faith as skeptical, but he still experienced his decision to keep Shabbat as a choice in the best sense of the word. Despite now being (in his words) religious, he chooses to disconnect from his community on Shabbat. In doing so, Menachem contradicts the Durkheimian approach, which emphasizes the importance of the communal aspect of building holiness (Durkheim 1911). In disconnecting from his social surroundings, Menachem authentically validates his choice—he chooses quiet, while saying "I don't have a good answer" when asked why he does not watch a film, instead focusing on family and his desired silence. Menachem expresses an internal dialogue between the varied sides of his personality, between his past and present religious practice, and acknowledges the tension between free choice and restrictive time. However, this is the same tension that produces the quiet and leisure time that he needs. Another interviewee, Eran, a traditional 39-year-old architect, presents the dimension of choice and self-expression as integrated within his chosen traditional framework:

In my opinion, what I derive from Shabbat is the ability to converge into myself for a moment out of the crazy and busy week. To take a break from everything and to have some kind of pause. Today and over the last year especially I've begun thinking that this pause has become the highlight of my week. Like every Shabbat, when it starts or when it ends, I have feelings or exaltations or great unease. It's receiving myself and then losing myself again.

Eran, whose internal world is less strictly structured than Menachem, seeks to focus on himself. Like Menachem, the work week leads to the desire for rest; not only is he keenly waiting for Shabbat, but over time he sees it "converging" into "the highlight of the week." However, this results in distress when it does not match his expectations. Saying that he loses himself again is like living in a double reality, the Eran who works every day according to the expectations of society but rests on Shabbat in accordance with his individualist worldview. This is particularly fascinating because Avraham, a 47-year-old freelancer who defines himself as secular, does the reverse: He starts his explanation with himself but finishes with the collective. As he describes:

Shabbat is good for my soul. We leave the office on Thursday, change the switch in our heads, "Me Time" for all intents and purposes. Fewer calls, fewer disturbances. You know that nobody from work will call you on Friday or Saturday. Your brain disconnects from the business, your brain disconnects from the world of the week and you're in your time... waiting for the weekend for trips, excursions, plans, obviously all the worlds of

Shabbat. I'm referring to everyone in Israel, Shabbat is special for us all. I believe that everyone does something over Shabbat.

In the beginning Avraham presents the resting self, who finishes his work and seeks to rest, but later he switches to the plural, still in the secular space, looking forward to weekend trips and excursions. When he talks about weekend plans, Avraham presents a wider collective dimension, about different groups and their "worlds of Shabbat." Here, this same dimension of personal choice and quiet becomes a collective choice in which diverse worlds are fulfilled in a particular way, whether one does not travel on Shabbat or sanctifies it in other ways. Avraham also describes the collective dimension of Shabbat, focusing on the desire of the private individual, resulting in the choice of a different Shabbat, full of special plans.

As can be seen in all the religious streams, the choice to make Shabbat unique by behaving differently on Shabbat frees up time for activities based on personal choice, different in substance to how they spend the rest of the week.

Shabbat Plans as the Realization of Individual Choice

Although acknowledging Shabbat restrictions, many interviewees, both religious and secular, described it as a time of free choice that allows unlimited individual realization. Even if they spent Shabbat differently, in describing an ideal Shabbat the interviewees spoke of a lengthy period free from any other obligations. This is how, for example, Daniel, a 30-year-old secular Jew from Kfar Aza, described his Shabbat:

Each Shabbat morning I want to put on a record, like the cliches of the dreams of relationships, when you dream about a Shabbat with your partner on the beach, smoking a joint... listening to a record in the morning, him preparing scrambled eggs for me, cleaning the house a bit, going out for a trip, meeting friends, chilling out and returning home in the evening... everything in a restful spirit, getting up in the morning, sitting, being, you know. Listening to a record from beginning to end... it's really a matter of energy.

Shabbat is the highlight of Daniel's week and the embodiment of his personal choice—whether he spends it by the sea, in nature, or listening to a record from start to finish. Daniel describes these activities as mentally restful and non-restrictive, nor does he usually do them on weekdays. Being free from other obligations allows Daniel to achieve his desired change. Many of those who do not keep Shabbat religiously are also ready to pay a price to have this free time. For example, many of the interviewees described how they chose to clean the home or shop on Thursday night or Friday morning, so as to benefit from the subsequent free time:

Thursday is the day I do a major clean. Whether it's sheets and dust and laundry that I haven't done during the week... I prefer to do it all on Thursday so

that on Friday morning I'll be able to finish the cooking early and start resting (Inbar, 49, secular).

[If I cleaned on Friday] I know that on Friday I have all the time to myself. And for me Friday and Saturday is for rest, leisure, and enjoyment. Totally. So usually, I try to do all the tasks, whether it's cleaning, shopping... I prefer to do it on Thursday (Atar, 35, secular).

I enjoy the fact that I don't do anything for a day and a half, but [before that] I work for half a day like I work the rest of the week, for the sake of that day and a half, I cook loads and I also get the house ready, wash dishes so they won't pile up, change the sheets, do laundry (because I didn't do it the whole week and I can't do it on Shabbat)... I have to do it on Friday [morning], that's the price so there will be 25 hours of quiet (Na'ama, 32, formerly religious).

These three excerpts show that Shabbat preparations, which include shopping and cleaning, free the rest of the weekend for complete rest and the realization of personal desires. Preparations for Shabbat are performed not because of a commandment but as the "price" that must be paid to free up the time for more meaningful leisure. This need to free up time over the weekend is evidence of the value of utilizing time that has become dominant in contemporary capitalist societies (Glorieux et al. 2008; Shir-Wise 2018). Similarly, one can also see the individual dimension of Shabbat as personal time among more religious communities. While they describe the religious community and *halachic* obligations as a more important aspect of managing and utilizing time on Shabbat, they also articulate the choice element of Shabbat in largely personal terms:

In the substantial meaning of what is Shabbat, in the root of the... So the substance of Shabbat is basically... There's an expression that appears that it's like a day of realization. If I come to you and I tell you that I've put \$20,000 in your bank account, you haven't got any medical problems, I've granted all your wishes. OK, what do you do now? Most of our lives we're dealing with... We're dealing with putting out fires, dealing with something that we lack, OK, it's OK you have everything. I have all the money, health, peace, I have everything I need. What now? A person who will take this thing... OK? One will go to the sea. One will play golf, one will teach Torah, one will read a book and one will sit with the family and one will do everything together. But it's already an issue of what values the person is realizing, in terms of their hierarchy of values. But it's the same issue (Ezra, 38, Ultra-Orthodox, Jerusalem).

Ezra's words show how, in his view, the importance of keeping Shabbat is the result of an individual set of preferences, and preserving this free time constitutes a sanctification of the self. Ezra sees Shabbat as a day of self-realization, which can be achieved in different ways. Daniel, meanwhile, expresses a far more individual rationale, the opposite of the collective justification for keeping Shabbat. Shabbat, in

this context, is described in individualist terms, and in contrast to its restrictions and obligations, it is also described as a time where people have the autonomy to freely choose how they will spend their time. Similar ideas emerge from Haim, a 38-year-old Ultra-Orthodox man from Bnei Brak:

It's like a person who plays a character. An actor who plays a character and he's inside the character and suddenly something happens to him... I don't know? Suddenly his son calls from the kindergarten and asks to be picked up. I'm in character now. Don't distract me with everything that's happening all around... Now this character isn't another character. I'm not playing a character who I imagine. But I'm playing a character of myself who I want to be. This is the ideal of Shabbat.

Here Haim also illustrates how keeping Shabbat, despite the rigid laws, is understood as the opposite of restrictive. In practice, these prohibitions create an autonomous space that is not available in daily life. Although Haim and Ezra describe Shabbat as a time of unlimited possibilities, the freedom they experience in following the supposedly restrictive *halacha* allows them to dedicate their time to rest and family.

Family and Rest on Shabbat

Another common characteristic of Shabbat for many interviewees was the choice to devote much of the weekend to rest and family time. Descriptions of the choice of rest combines a more universal conception of rest with its *halachic* conception, which finds expression on both religious extremes—Ultra-Orthodox on the one hand and secular on the other. In both cases, rest is described as a guiding principle for how to act over the weekend, even if it may entail costs, as for example described by Hani:

First and foremost, Shabbat is rest... Shabbat is rest and therefore... Even when guests come, I'm not ready for Shabbat to... I'm not prepared to work hard on Shabbat. On Shabbat I rest. I get everything done before Shabbat and I rest. I don't go crazy, and I don't.... I don't make an effort... I rest. So It's a bit of rest from the week, OK? In addition there's also the issue that all work is forbidden. I shouldn't think about things that bother me like work that I have to present (Hani, Ultra-Orthodox, 47, Bnei Brak).

Hani emphasizes that the prohibition of work is just one element of the decision to rest on Shabbat. In practice, it is important for Hani to rest on Shabbat even if this has implications for the preparations. For Hani, taking a break from the stresses of daily life is more important than working hard to prepare for Shabbat. Similar but more universal sentiments about resting on Shabbat arise from the following excerpt:

A person needs to rest for a moment. To pause. To stop life for a moment, to take a small pause, to stop for a moment before returning to the race of another week. People need this... this moment. Even without connection to it [Shabbat]. It's recommended for everyone. Whether they are religious, secular, it doesn't matter exactly, everyone needs rest. Everyone's running and needs to stop for a moment and to do a restart on the weekend and what's beyond, how you begin the following week (Lidor, Ultra-Orthodox, 35, Ofakim).

This unique combination of the concept of rest as a justification in and of itself and the *halachic* commandment to rest over Shabbat becomes clearer in the words of Ayala:

I said to my friend from another department: 'Listen – Shabbat is simply a genius invention! Only God could have thought of something like that. It's simply genius... I wouldn't change anything. I don't want to clean on Shabbat. I don't care if the sink is full. I don't want to... I want to be forbidden from cleaning. I don't want it to be... Now sometimes I have piles of laundry that aren't easy to fold before Shabbat so I even... It doesn't even bother me to see the pile of laundry. It's fun for me that on Shabbat I'm forbidden from doing homework. It's fun that I'm forbidden from traveling. If I needed to, I would utilize it because my life is very busy. I work and study and I also have five children, my life is very full. The fact that I'm forbidden from doing these things is simply a pleasure. A pleasure. A pleasure. I don't want the mall to be open, for myself, OK? I don't want it (Ayala, Ultra-Orthodox, 41, Elad).

The picture described above shows that resting over the weekend and Shabbat is not only seen as a *halachic* obligation whose goal is the sanctification or keeping of Shabbat, but also as a period of rest from the intensity of daily life. In addition, resting on Shabbat allows people time for themselves and to be with their families and for "cleaning one's head," none of which necessarily stems from the religious commandment to abstain from work. These descriptions show that, while rest is an important part of the *halachic* commandments, this is not the only reason interviewees choose to rest. Instead, they are seeking to take a break from the routine that dominates their lives as participants in the labor market and consumer culture (for example Ayala's reference to the mall). This kind of rest is not necessarily based on conceptions of Shabbat as sanctified time, even if one can assume that its sanctified status is what provides the practice of resting its great value.

Similarly, in asking why non-religious Jews rest on Shabbat, one can identify how rest is not only understood as the absence of work, but also as a personal choice to meaningfully abstain from work:

I must feel that I'm resting in one way or another, I must feel that I'm doing what I want to do. That I'm using the time and I'm not doing anything, and even if I didn't do anything that I enjoyed it... Even if I go out, I'll want to return home and put my feet up, and not do anything... When I don't need to

empty the dishwasher or do laundry, like, idleness. And I must start getting ready for it already on Friday (Yahel, 35, secular, Givatayim).

For Yahel, relatively basic activities such as operating the dishwasher or the washing machine and participating in group activities or enjoying other hobbies are inappropriate on Shabbat. Sometimes, this leads to dividing the Shabbat period into 2 days—Friday and Saturday—she mainly organizes the house on Friday and rests on Shabbat:

I don't cook on Shabbat... I don't work on Shabbat... my husband always says that when I see the pile of laundry it's a sign that Shabbat is going to end, it's a sign that we're starting to get organized for tomorrow (Hila, formerly religious, 34, Petah Tikva).

Like Yahel, Hila also illustrates how different household tasks are inappropriate on Shabbat, and not only among religious communities. The desire to not do “daily” activities and to devote Shabbat to rest for the body and soul is what creates a clean space of time throughout the holy day and determines what activities are suitable. This collection of quotes shows how one can see Shabbat as free time, which should be preserved as such not only because of the Jewish sanctity of the day, but also because of the sanctity of the Shabbat as a personal space that is free of obligations. Therefore, one can see how the choice to keep Shabbat is one of the most significant ways one can see the individual dimension shaping time and its characteristics. In practice, only a minority described keeping Shabbat as a practice that was not chosen autonomously, and maintaining the uniqueness of Shabbat, even if not according to the *halacha*, was described as an intentional choice. Separating the day of rest from the remaining days of the week requires prior, sometimes significant, preparation that creates two regimes of time: structured free time in the first part of the weekend, with the goal of creating unstructured free time in the second part. To a great extent, unstructured time is seen as the highlight of the week for realizing personal desires, and therefore both religious and secular people are ready to invest time and effort to ensure that it will take place under optimal conditions.

Conclusions

Despite differences, Israeli Jews share much in common in how they experience Shabbat. Most importantly, Jews in Israel express a high commitment to separation between regular weekdays and Shabbat, albeit sometimes with differing motivations. Shabbat is the main time for different kinds of activities, with an emphasis on family and rest.

For the most part they do not experience Shabbat as restrictive but rather as a time for rest and rejuvenation. This attempt to examine the nature and significance of the Jewish Sabbath in Israel reveals the tension between the *halachic*, national, social, and cultural restrictions that apply to this framework of time, and the way in

which Shabbat is experienced and described by the public. On the one hand, when describing Shabbat in Israel, people refer to restrictions, not only religious ones, but also an ideological national mindset supported by national laws and regulations and educational and cultural patterns of behavior. On the other hand, this study shows that Jews in Israel do not experience Shabbat as a period of restrictions, but as a time of freedom of choice and the realization of personal, familial, and social ideals.

For those who decide to “keep” Shabbat according to Jewish law, the tension is clearer, because the choice not to travel or to use electric appliances on Shabbat determines how the time can be spent. The choice to keep Shabbat is seen as an autonomous, aware, and calculated choice that allows it to be dedicated to values that are seen as more important—rest and family. Furthermore, those who keep Jewish law also describe the space for choice that exists within Shabbat as significant, one that permits wider and more varied choice, instead of a conception whereby Shabbat is characterized solely by *halachic* restrictions. For those who do not keep Shabbat the picture is more complicated. It is true to claim that, in the private sphere, a secular Israeli Jew can do what they want, but despite this they often “work hard beforehand” or make some kind of time-related sacrifice so they will have free time at the weekend and especially on Shabbat. Freeing up the weekend from different obligations means it can be filled with the same values and practices prioritized by those who do keep Shabbat—rest and family time.

Hence, one can assume that the construction of the Shabbat in Israeli culture is a collective narrative, with parts of society coming together to recognize its sanctity, whether because of a principled individual choice, compulsion, or an adjustment to the law and the Jewish–Israeli cultural space, or because of faith or a *halachic* choice to keep Shabbat. Whether consciously or otherwise, the different forms of conduct on Shabbat and the choice of a freed space are a collective action that is understood and described individually. Freeing up time on Shabbat and changing how one acts on Shabbat may show how the Jewish sources and laws constitute part of a broader social toolbox. What is sometimes described as an individual choice is largely based on a limited cultural toolbox, which can explain how Jews in Israel understand and experience Shabbat. Perhaps different from the public discourse and research framing Shabbat as a point of tension between restrictions and desires, the interviewees in this study did not express explicit tension or anger regarding restrictions on public transportation, shopping malls, and other public facilities. This is likely due to the characteristics of the sample, but it also provides a basis for further research in this area.

In addition to the insights of this study, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. First, the interviewees may have described an ideal version of Shabbat rather than the actual one, and there is also the potential problem of recency bias. Moreover, to determine whether and to what extent the Israeli–Jewish Shabbat is unique to its culture, it is vital to examine the practices associated with the Shabbat of Jews outside of Israel. Additionally, within Israel itself, it is essential to explore the experiences of other groups, including non-Jews and Reform and Conservative Jews, as well as people outside the age range defined in this study. This leaves plenty of room for follow-up studies.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval The research was conducted according to strict ethical standards and with the approval of the Ethics Committee of Bar-Ilan University.

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