

SIGN OF A JEW

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And the Children of Israel shall guard the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath throughout their generations as an eternal Covenant. Between Me and the Children of Israel it is an eternal sign, that in six days G-d made the Heavens and the Earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and rested." [31:16-17]

"The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moshe, 'Moshe, I have a wonderful gift in my vault, and its name is Sabbath. I want to give it to Israel; go and tell them.'" [Talmud Beitzah 16a]

Just this week, I had the opportunity to counsel a family whose daughter is seriously considering an intermarriage. They were up in arms, to put it mildly, arguing with her and telling her not to marry her non-Jewish beau.

I pointed out to them that in this sort of situation, a direct confrontation may not be the most productive course. Rather than arguing against a non-Jewish partner, their daughter needs to see enough positive Judaism in her life to discover that much of what she values and wants will not be possible in an intermarriage relationship. And at that point, my first suggestion was that they make a Sabbath dinner as a family.

It is very common for people to look at Sabbath observance and imagine that it is profoundly restrictive. One cannot drive, or even use the phone, in anything less than a life-threatening situation. Then those same people finally take the plunge, "for better or for worse." And a year later, they say that they don't understand how they survived without it!

The busier a person is, the more pressing his or her other obligations, the more profound and positive the effect of a Sabbath day of rest. It forces us to realize that we have other priorities, that our work is not our life.

We have an unfortunate tendency to define who we are by what we do: I am a doctor, a storeowner, an engineer, etc. In the Book of Yonah, the prophet rejects these as peripheral to who we truly are. When the sailors cast lots to see who was causing the storm threatening the ship, and the lot fell to Yonah, they asked him: "what is your work, and where do you come from? What is your land, and from what nation are you?"

He answered simply: "Ivri anochi," I am a Hebrew, "and HaShem G-d of the Heavens I fear, Who made the sea and the dry land." Everything you asked me is unimportant. Who am I? I am a Jew.

And what is the sign of the Jew? The Sabbath is that eternal sign. Rabbi Yisrael Mayer Kagan, the

Chofetz Chaim, compares it to a craftsman's sign: the barber's pole, the horseshoe outside the blacksmith's. As long as people saw those signs, they knew that the craftsman was in business. Even if he went away for a few days, everyone expected him to return to work. But if the sign came down, it indicated that the craftsman had moved away.

The Sabbath is the sign of the Jewish home. We find this homiletically in the Hebrew word for "throughout their generations," written in our verse such that it could be read "throughout their dwellings." A prepared house, a set table, candles lit and ready -- these impart a unique character to that home in which they are found.

The Sabbath changes the way that families interact. Parents sit down with their children for meals, uninterrupted by telephone calls and without the distraction of waiters or other diners (other than guests sharing the experience). The office, looming deadlines, and telemarketers cannot interfere. No one who experiences this environment emerges unaffected.

In too many homes, the sign has come down. Jews dwell therein, but the sign is gone -- and to some, Judaism seems to be going out of business.

A Sabbath meal is something every one of us can do. No generation needs a weekly vacation more than ours of cell phones and instant messengers. No generation needs to instill positive Judaism in its children more than ours.

Try it for a few weeks. Post the sign, and surprising profits are guaranteed!

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken