

A PUBLIC OBSERVANCE OF SHABAT

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Rashi points out that the section of the parsha that deals with the observance and holiness of Shabat was related to the Jewish people in a public manner with all of the people in attendance. Moshe gathered all of Israel to him to declare the concept of the sanctity of the Shabat.

We are taught that almost all of the other precepts, values and commandments of the Torah were taught by Moshe firstly to a select group of his relatives and then to the elders of Israel and then finally they taught the general public the understanding of Torah and the workings of the Oral Law. Apparently this method was deemed insufficient when it came to the core principle of Judaism which Shabat represents.

Shabat needed a public forum and its importance needed to be emphasized in front of the entire gathering, similar to the granting of the Torah itself at Sinai or the final covenant with Israel at the end of Moshe's life as recorded for us in the book of Dvarim.

In my opinion, the Torah alludes in this fashion to the fact that the survival of the Jewish people is dependent not only on the private observance of the Shabat by every Jew but that Jewish society must recognize and incorporate within itself a public observance of Shabat as well. It is not only the Jewish home that must be recognizable as being special and holy on Shabat but the Jewish street must also be so recognizable and special on Shabat as well.

The private Shabat observance has made positive strides over the past few decades. The public Shabat however has regressed both in Israel and in the United States. The JCC centers in almost all major Jewish communities in the United States have abandoned the Shabat.

Many of them claim that it is because the majority of their clientele is no longer Jewish. The irony of this excuse is apparently lost on them. The reason that the Jews have abandoned JCC centers is because those Jews also previously abandoned the Shabat. Here in Israel the public Shabat many times is observed mainly in the breach of the existing Shabat laws rather than in observance and conformity with them.

Again, the irony of those who want Israel to be a Jewish state but are not at all supportive of a public Shabat is exquisite. For it is the public Shabat more than any other public sign of Jewishness - flag, language, culture, etc. - that defines Israel as being a Jewish state.

And its continued erosion by greedy kibbutz shops, city malls, open businesses and nightclubs - and, by the way it appears that Friday night, leil Shabat, is the most violent and crime ridden night of the week - have only made our country not only less Jewish but less safe, less civilized, more emotionally unsatisfactory and less secure.

Most of the children here in Israel receive no education regarding Shabat, its history and importance in Jewish history and life. That is a sure fire recipe for diminishing our chances to have a Jewish state here in our holy land. The public Shabat should be strengthened in all ways in order to guarantee a meaningful future for Jewish generations that are yet to come.

Shabat shalom. Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com