

SHABBAT ALWAYS WINS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah reading of this week opens with a review and reiteration of the concept and laws of Shabbat. The rabbis of the Talmud used this juxtaposition of Shabbat and the detailed description of the construction of the Tabernacle to derive and define what type of work was forbidden on Shabbat. This is certainly very noteworthy as it forms the basis of understanding the values of Shabbat as they apply to us, especially as it provides a rest from the stresses of modern life.

However, there is another insight present in this discussion of Shabbat. The first word of the Torah reading indicates that it took place in a public venue with all gathered to hear Moshe explain this concept for them and for all their generations. We are thus informed that among the many facets of the diamond of Shabbat, there is not only the private one that is observed within the home and the synagogue but also the public one that can be seen and recognized and felt even on the street and in general society itself.

For a long period of time in Jewish history, over the past two to three centuries, both facets of Shabbat were seriously challenged within the Jewish world. With the growth of the Orthodox community, especially over the last 60 years, the pride in the Shabbat has been salvaged. Even though the majority of the Jewish people are not really Sabbath observers today, there are entire sections of the Jewish people that have preserved the Shabbat in all of its beauty and allowed its holiness to invest its homes and families.

The struggle for the public Shabbat is being waged here in Israel and wherever large Jewish communities exist in the world. There are entire neighborhoods in the Diaspora where the population is overwhelmingly made up of Orthodox Jews and the public Shabbat is observed and visible. In these Jewish neighborhoods there is practically no traffic on Shabbat nor any visible public desecrations of the holy day. However, here in Israel the public Shabbat is, and has been for the past century, a strong bone of contention between the religiously observant and secular elements of Israeli society.

In cities such as Jerusalem and even Tel Aviv there is no public transportation that operates on the Shabbat. However, there is a constant demand from secular groups for this element of the public Shabbat to be eliminated and for the Sabbath to be confined to the home and the synagogue. But it is the public Shabbat that is most necessary in Jewish society. It is the public Shabbat that defines us and reminds us of who and why we are and what our mission of service and devotion in life truly is. It is unfortunate that the public Shabbat like many other truly spiritual and apolitical values have been hijacked by politicians of all stripes and turned into contention and misunderstanding. I am confident,

though, that the Shabbat will always win out, as it always has, even the public elements of Shabbat.
Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein