

# What We've Lost in Rejecting the Sabbath

**Setting aside one day a week for rest and prayer used to be an American tradition. In an age of constant activity, we need it more than ever.**

By Sohrab Ahmari Updated May 7, 2021

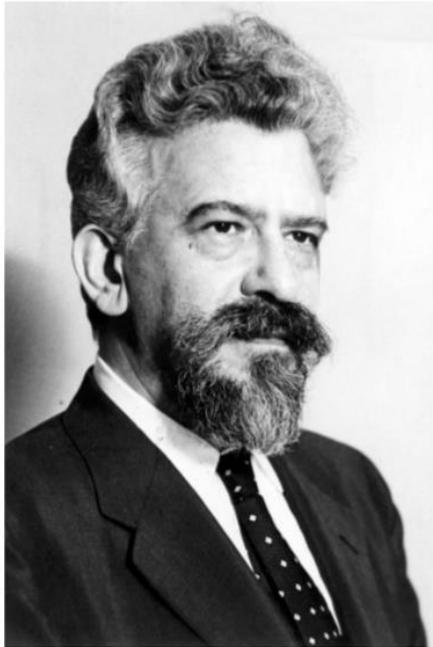
In 2019, North Dakota lawmakers abolished their state's Sunday-trading ban. Going back to the 19th century, business owners had faced jail time and a fine for keeping their doors open Sunday mornings. It was America's last statewide blue law, and it went the way of the rotary telephone and the airplane smoking section. The bill's main GOP sponsor in the state legislature claimed that a majority "wants to make decisions for themselves." Ending the ban, officials argued, would boost shopping and, with it, revenues.

Who but a few scolds could complain? The share of Americans who don't identify with any religion continues to grow, and even many believers reject the concept of the Sabbath as a divinely ordained day of rest. Instead, we are encouraged to pursue lives of constant action and purpose, and we do. Smart devices allow white-collar professionals to freely mingle work and play. The gig economy and the Covid-19 work-from-home trend have further blurred the line between the two. The Sabbath doesn't fit into the rhythm of our lives. It feels like an imposition—it is an imposition.

Americans' turn away from the Sabbath has been going on for a long time. In the mid-20th century, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of America's foremost Jewish thinkers, wrote about the Sabbath in terms of "the realm of time" and "the realm of space." Modern life is all about conquering space: winning geopolitical territory, growing and prospering economically. But "the danger begins," Heschel

worried, “when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time.” In that realm, “the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”

Many of his American coreligionists in those days saw the ritual as an impediment



Rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel in 1964.

PHOTO: CSU ARCHIVES/EVERETT COLLECTION

to freedom: the freedom to shop, work and socialize as much as they wanted. For Heschel, this brand of freedom was missing something profound. It barred entry to an entire dimension of existence: namely, time, whose passage reminds us that everything is contingent, everything passes away—everything, that is, except God. The Sabbath, Heschel thought, is the guarantor of our “inner liberty,” while restless, Sabbath-less societies could easily descend into tyranny and barbarism.

He had learned this from bitter experience. Heschel was born in 1907 in czarist-ruled Warsaw, where traditional and modern Jewish currents converged and clashed. He was a prince of the traditional Jewish world, heir to Polish and Lithuanian Hasidic

dynasties and formed from an early age to become a rabbi. Thanks to a photographic memory, he excelled at memorizing the Torah, the Jewish prayer book and the foundational medieval commentaries on the Bible.

Even as a boy, his biographer Edward Kaplan tells us, “Heschel was treated like a rebbe, with deference. Expecting wise answers to their questions, people rose to greet him when he entered a room.” Competing Hasidic impulses vied for his soul: an ecstatic spiritual optimism in tension with an austere moral vision that harshly judged human nature. The one gave “me wings,” he would later write, the other “encircled me with chains.” Only the Sabbath could reconcile the antagonistic impulses. The celebration of God’s rest opened a holy dimension to its observers—

“a dimension,” Heschel wrote years later, “in which the human is at home with the divine.

Ordained as a rabbi at 16, Heschel went on to seek secular learning, and in 1927 he enrolled as a philosophy student at the University of Berlin. The golden-age culture of Weimar Germany was in full swing, but Heschel for the most part kept his nose in his studies. A skeptical spirit dominated his chosen field, the philosophy of religion. The scholars Heschel encountered didn’t ask: What does this biblical text tell us about God or morality? But rather: What do these claims about God and morality tell us about the culture that produced the text?

In such circumstances, holding fast to his forefathers’ faith proved taxing. But one night in the early 1930s, while strolling Berlin’s “magnificent streets,” Heschel had a breakthrough. “Suddenly, I noticed the sun had gone down, evening had arrived.” He had forgotten about time. He should have been preparing for the evening prayer. “I had forgotten God—I had forgotten Sinai—I had forgotten that sunset is my business.” The sunset reminded Heschel of his “task” as a believer and a faithful Jew: namely, “to restore the world to the kingship of the Lord.”



A mother and daughter light candles for Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath.

PHOTO: ALAMY

Fired up by this awakening, he went on to write a dissertation on the Hebrew prophets that reversed “the secular-humanistic projects of his time,” as Kaplan puts it. The goal of a philosophy of religion, Heschel argued, shouldn’t be to understand “God” as an ancient idea or symbol, still less a disturbance in the ancient mind, but to understand human beings as the living God’s project and as partakers in the divine “pathos.”

This God-centric understanding, he came to believe, was the only sure guarantee of human dignity. Without an absolute standard that reflected the will of a supreme being, people could countenance any evil; everything could be relativized. And it wasn’t enough merely to contemplate this supreme being. Rather, the God-centric vision had to be nurtured in a life of prayer and ritual—that is to say, in the dimension of time. In the Sabbath.

On Jan. 30, 1933, German President Paul von Hindenburg administered the oath of office to a new chancellor, Adolf Hitler. The first mass anti-Semitic attack came on April 1, when Nazi thugs launched a boycott of Jewish businesses. Jewish merchants were forced to post yellow stars on their storefronts. Brownshirts stood outside, warning “Aryans” to take their business elsewhere.

The boycott took place on a Saturday—on the Sabbath. The timing wasn’t lost on Heschel. He published an anonymous Yiddish-language poem pouring scorn on the Nazis: “On Sabbath day / At ten o’clock, a filthy-brown mass of people / Sat on shoulders, on doorsteps, on thresholds.../ Gut yontif [happy holiday], purebred Germans!”

In 1938, Heschel was expelled to Poland along with some 70,000 other Polish Jews living in Germany. This reunited him with his Polish kin, but it also left him vulnerable to the genocidal threat that would soon descend upon Polish Jewry. Though Heschel didn’t know it, his writing had brought him to the attention of Julian Morgenstern, the president of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Morgenstern resolved to save Heschel along with a number of other imperiled Jewish scholars, and in March 1940 he arrived in the New World.

But Heschel couldn’t save his Warsaw kin. His mother died of a heart attack when Nazi troops stormed her apartment in the Warsaw Ghetto. One sister perished under Nazi bombing; two others were murdered in German death camps, two of the six million Jews immolated in “the fire of an altar to Satan,” as he famously wrote.

Heschel is best remembered for his political activism in the U.S. during the 1960s. He vociferously opposed the Vietnam War, marched arm-in-arm with Martin Luther King Jr. and was the only Jew to eulogize King at the civil-rights leader’s funeral. His lifelong hatred of injustice was foremost an outpouring of his piety.

That piety, nurtured in Hasidic soil and cultivated by German philosophy, clashed with the spirit of American Judaism. With few exceptions, his new students struck him as ill-read, shallow, inattentive to interior things. They, in turn, seem to have

found him irascible and hard to understand, a figure straight out of central casting for Eccentric Old World Academic. The students' shortcomings mirrored the spiritual state of the U.S. as a whole: its relentlessly practical sensibility, its impatience with the contemplative life. Americans were very much prepared to abandon the realm of time—the realm of the Sabbath—in conquering the realm of space.

Yet it hadn't always been so. In earlier times, a robust Protestant tradition disciplined America's commercial drive. Sabbatarianism—the notion that the law must uphold Sunday as a day of rest and worship—was taken for granted in colonial America, as much in the supposedly more secular Virginia as in puritan New England. The Dutchmen who settled New Amsterdam in lower Manhattan likewise imposed Sunday blue laws.

Leading American statesmen and clergy in the post-revolutionary period framed the observance of the Sabbath as an essential bulwark against the depravities that had marked the French Revolution. When President John Adams declared a National Fast Day on May 9, 1798, amid deteriorating relations with revolutionary France, Yale President Timothy Dwight took to the pulpit to warn that “to destroy us, our enemies must first destroy our Sabbath.” So seriously did early Americans take the Sabbath that, legend has it, even President George Washington got an earful from a local magistrate for riding from Connecticut to New York on a Sunday in 1789.

Yet Sabbatarianism wasn't forceful enough to stop the federal postal service from delivering mail on Sundays—a fact that drew the ire of Protestant leaders, not least because post offices had become places for men to drink and carouse. Economic and partisan considerations repeatedly blocked legislative attempts to ban Sunday mail delivery throughout the 19th century.

Facing the objection that stopping delivery on Sundays would hurt the national economy, New Jersey Senator Theodore Frelinghuysen pointed out that “a busy commercial center such as London took Sundays off without apparent problem,” as historian Gillis Harp writes. But even if there was some financial loss, Frelinghuysen

added, America shouldn't measure "public worth by dollars and cents" and shouldn't tolerate "this national profanation."

It would take the alliance of a nascent labor movement and the spiritual heirs of Frelinghuysen to finally end Sunday mail delivery in 1912. Yet the 20th century saw the death of the American Sabbath by a thousand cuts, as states began to permit localities to liberalize blue laws. Usually they began by permitting recreational activities that didn't amount to "servile labor," such as baseball or horse-racing. Even as the Supreme Court repeatedly upheld Sunday trading bans on constitutional grounds, the days of stores being sternly shuttered on Sundays were soon over. Now even the U.S. Postal Service delivers mail on Sundays again—for [Amazon](#). Before Heschel denounced the injustices that disfigured America, he deplored the commercialized, technocratic way of life that denied time to the Sabbath. What his industrious fellow Americans might have mistaken for "wasted time" was, in fact, an absolutely necessary act. In biblical logic, holiness always requires sacrificial abandonment: Something must be handed over to God. This logic of sacrifice is at work in an especially tangible way in the Sabbath. As Heschel wrote, "he who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil."

It is difficult to imagine just how revolutionary the Sabbath vision must have appeared in the ancient world, where vast multitudes of people were slaves. Into such a world, there appeared a religion that told slaves they had an identity separate from their labor, that their nonwork was sacred. Judaism taught men and women to find inner liberty by freeing themselves from "domination of things as well as from domination of people," as Heschel observed.



A Sunday service at Words of Life Fellowship Church in Miami, Fla.

PHOTO: ALAMY

Judaism, Christianity and Islam all appreciated the bond between Sabbath restrictions and human freedom, even as they designated different days to be holy. Across the West today, however, the drive toward maximal market liberty has squeezed out the liberty of the Sabbath. We have banished it in the name of “choice.” And some choice we have: Working-class families are denied even a half-day of rest together, yet we are puzzled by astronomical divorce rates, abysmally low rates of family formation, alienation and drug abuse. We have cashiered the Sabbath for algorithmic human-resources scheduling—computer code designed to minimize labor costs, regardless of the impact on families and communities.

For professionals, the Sabbath’s demise means barrages of emails to be answered during sleepless nights spent by the ghostly blue glow of the smartphone. For other workers, the Sabbath’s defeat means missed children’s baseball games, lunches

wolfed down on impossibly short breaks and bladders relieved in bottles in the vast warehouses of endless consumer choice.

In our day, as in Heschel's, a world without the Sabbath is a world without soul.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel celebrated his final Sabbath on Friday, Dec. 22, 1972. As usual, the dinner was attended by friends, who read aloud from the Yiddish poems Heschel had written while forging his biblical thought in the crucible of the Holocaust. The next morning, he didn't wake up. His daughter, Susannah, has written: "In Jewish tradition, dying in one's sleep is called a kiss of God, and dying on the Sabbath is a gift that is merited by piety."

*This essay is adapted from Mr. Ahmari's new book, "The Unbroken Thread: Discovering the Wisdom of Tradition in an Age of Chaos," to be published on May 11 by Convergent Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House. He is the op-ed editor of the New York Post, which like The Wall Street Journal is a division of [News Corp.](#)*