

A Rabbi's View On Sabbath

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There has been a great deal of debate about the Sabbath in Jamaica recently. Recently, 'Religious Hardtalk' featured Baptist minister Everaldo Allen talking to host Ian Boyne on the proper interpretation of what is called in Hebrew, Shabbat. Allen argued that the 'old covenant' is obsolete, with Boyne, while agreeing on that point, arguing that the Sabbath is perpetual. Responding in **The Gleaner**, Devon Dick ('Debating the Sabbath', Thursday, March 10) refers to the subgroup of early Christians who insisted on the validity of the Mosaic Law, including Shabbat observance. What is missing from this discussion is a contemporary Jewish perspective.

The Sabbath is a central feature in modern Jewish religious life. Some would argue the central feature. To this day, the members of Shaare Shalom Synagogue in Kingston gather on Friday nights and Saturday mornings to worship God and honour the Sabbath. Zionist thinker Ahad HaAm is credited with the often repeated truism that more than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews. By this he meant that the observance of the Sabbath was the critical observance for the maintenance of Jewish fidelity to the covenant, which remains in force to this day.

Breaking down the Sabbath

In Jewish tradition, God creates the world in six days. Modern Jewish interpreters understand these 'days' in a symbolic manner, rather than 24-hour units. On the seventh day, God ceased working, blessing the day and declaring it holy (Genesis 2:1-3). The Sabbath is a celebration of creation, an imitation of God's own day of rest, as well as an everlasting sign of the divine covenant with the Jewish people. In the book of Exodus, Adonai says to Moses, "Speak to the Israelite people and say: 'Nevertheless, you must keep My Sabbaths, for this is a sign between Me and you throughout the ages, that you may know that I, Adonai, have consecrated you. You shall keep the Sabbath, for it is holy for you.'" (31:12-14)

Jamaican society has become increasingly fast-paced. Whereas once 'island time' predominated, today Jamaicans are finding themselves bustling around virtually without stop. In an era of globalisation, we are subject to the same social and economic pressures as everyone else. In dramatic contrast, the teachings of Judaism on the Sabbath emphasise value in rest, reflection, study and tradition. Shabbat is a day of peace, indicated by the greeting 'Shabbat Shalom', meaning 'May you have a peaceful Sabbath'. We achieve a sense of peace by stopping as many weekday responsibilities as practical and possible.

The Sabbath is, of course, one of the Ten Commandments, a section of the Torah which has great religious import. In the first version of this text, which appears in the book of Exodus, God tells the Israelites to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy". (20:8) The text continues, "For in six

days Adonai made Heaven and Earth and sea - and all that is in them - and then rested on the seventh day; therefore, Adonai blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it." (20:11)

Off target regarding Israel

Unfortunately, Reverend Dick published a follow-up column (Thursday, March 17, 'God did not write Ten Commandments with fingers'), which jumps from a discussion of anthropomorphism in the Torah - the question of whether the Torah's use of physical imagery to describe God should be interpreted metaphorically - to a sudden and entirely disconnected attack on the State of Israel's security policies. Living on an island with no enemies in proximity, it may be hard for Devon Dick to understand the terribly difficult political situation in which the Israelis find themselves.

Judaism is not a proselytising religion, and so Jews do not feel that other Jamaicans need to convert in order to go to Heaven. Nevertheless, there are many great insights in the Jewish tradition that can provide religious inspiration for people of any and all faiths. The concept of the Sabbath can provide us with a model of how to balance work and rest, study and reflection, activity and peace.

Dana Evan Kaplan is the rabbi of Temple B'nai Israel in Albany, Georgia, and an adjunct associate professor at the Seigal College of Jewish Studies.

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