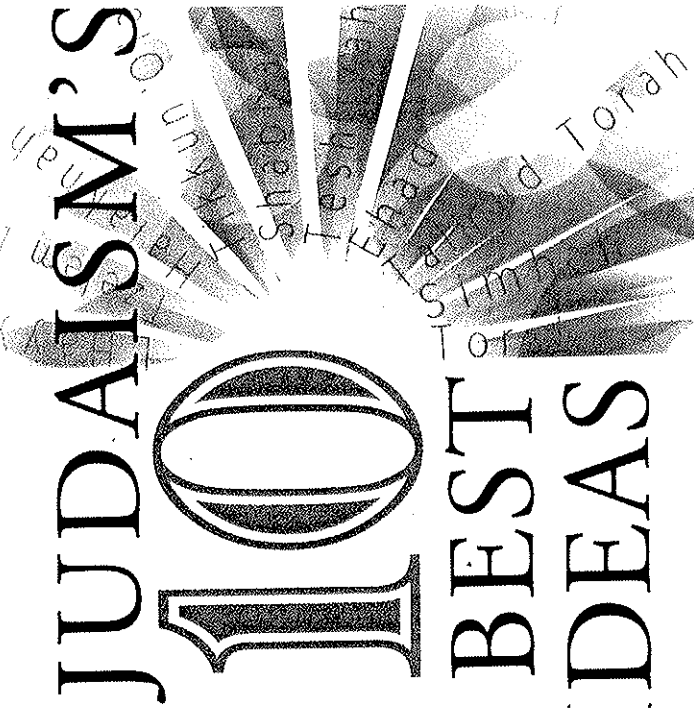


*"Superb! ... A gem, as valuable for one beginning to explore Judaism as for one who needs renewal of soul and purpose."*

—RABBI RACHEL COWAN,  
author of *Mixed Blessings*



# JUDAISM'S 10 BEST IDEAS

*A Brief Guide for Seekers*

ARTHUR GREEN

author of *These Are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life*



## SHABBAT

### Getting Off the Treadmill

#### The Secret of Shabbat

I am the Jew I am today largely because of my close relationship with my mother's parents, immigrant Jews who had been brought up in the premodern world of small-town Eastern Europe and who came to America in the early years of the twentieth century. They were not what one would call Orthodox Jews; Grandpa's tailor shop was open on Saturdays, although he regretted it. Grandma, in their apartment over the store, ran a tighter ship. There was no cooking on the Sabbath, no writing, and no sewing. Her home was strictly kosher.

But could you really keep kosher in America? It wasn't like the old country, she would complain, where you knew who slaughtered each chicken, who plucked the feathers, and everything else about it. You should investigate, she said, and find out if the butcher is *shomer Shabbat* (or *Shabbos*, as she would have pronounced it), a strict Sabbath observer. If he is, she said, you can trust his meat. Otherwise, beware. America is a pretty corrupt and dangerous place.

How did observing the Sabbath become the defining trait of a citizen in good standing in the world of Jewish piety? Why not some other commandment, such as that of daily prayer, of giving to the poor, or even of believing in God and the Torah? Why is it a Sabbath observer who may be trusted, serving as a proper witness on a Jewish legal document, for example?

We don't have an answer to that question, but we do have a good story about it. Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya is one of the great sages in the early second century; another friend of Rabbi Akiva. His chief disciple was Meir, who was to become a major teacher in his own right. But something happened to Elisha. He rejected the way of the rabbis, followed some other teaching (we're not sure which) and departed from the rabbinic form of observance. Still, Meir respected his knowledge and wanted to

learn from him. One Sabbath day, after Elisha's apostasy, they were walking together outside town and discussing Torah. When they were two thousand cubits (about one thousand yards) from the town's edge, Elisha said to his disciple, "Go back!" for only thus far is one allowed to walk outside the town on the Sabbath. To step beyond it was to leave behind the observant community. Even though Elisha no longer observed the rule, he still knew it and was concerned for his disciple. Meir turned to his teacher and said, meaning much more than geography, "You too come back!" But Elisha could not, and the two men parted ways.<sup>1</sup> Here we see the border of Jewish life being drawn: to stand inside it is to live within the Sabbath rules, to walk farther is to go outside the bounds of traditional Jewish life and the community of those who observe it.

For many Jews entering the modern world, it all seemed so old-fashioned and repressive. The Sabbath was just a great list of "don'ts." For Americans, these looked too much like the old blue laws, unwelcome restrictions on our inalienable right to "pursue happiness" by drinking and shopping seven days a week. Whole generations of Jews rebelled against the Sabbath laws, until their observance became the exception rather than the norm.

But today we look at Shabbat from a different, more contemporary, perspective. We are living through one of the great ages of the speeding up of human consciousness. How incredibly fast the pace of our lives has become! The computer revolution, and with it the possibility of virtually instantaneous worldwide communication, has made us think about time in new terms. How many times a day do you check your email? How soon do people expect you to respond to their queries and messages? Remember when letters used to take two or three days to arrive? "Snail mail," we call it now. Just watch your child playing computer games and see how fast that fleeting object runs across the screen. Could we chase *anything* that fast a generation ago? We worry about the effect all this may have on the human mind.

What has happened to our leisure? Remember all those labor-saving devices, all those prepackaged foods and household gadgets that were supposed to save us so much time? Where has that free time gone? It seems as though it's all been a plot just to free us up to work harder than ever, to answer messages ever faster, to squeeze more productivity out of each minute of our lives.

Shabbat is needed now more than ever. We Jews should be *missionary* about Shabbat. It may be the best gift we have to offer the world. The idea is that one day

a week you say no to our new master, the computer. You turn off the modem, look away from the screen and toward those around you, exercising a talent that may become rare in this age: the cultivation of real human community. My bumper-sticker slogan for Shabbat reads "Visit people, not websites."

But in order to give Shabbat to the world, we first need to reclaim it for ourselves. Most Jews, in the rush toward modernity, lost the rhythms of Shabbat and need to rediscover them. Shabbat does not belong only to the Orthodox minority who observe it strictly; it is the inheritance of all Jews. But how shall we do it? What might constitute a contemporary Shabbat?

Before we get to the specifics, we need to understand something about how the Shabbat rules came to be. Shabbat is made holy, or set aside from others days, according to the Torah, at the creation of the world. "God rested on the seventh day and hallowed it" (Gen. 2:3). I believe this is the Torah's way of saying that human life is not even *conceivable* without a day of rest; it was there from the very beginning. Unlike in ancient Near Eastern religions, where humans were created as servants, destined to bring offerings so that the gods could rest, here human beings are invited to partake of the divine gift of leisure. Not just the king or the upper classes were given the commandment of leisure,

but everyone, “so that your manservant and maidservant rest as you do” (Deut. 5:14). And we rest as God does.

But how do we define that leisure? The Torah, while emphasizing its importance, is remarkably sparing in detail. The only rules provided, beyond “you shall do no labor,” are prohibitions on gathering wood and lighting a fire. (Of course, that tells us a lot about the age from which these rules come.) In sharp contrast to Shabbat, however, the Torah happens to blossom with detail on another matter: how to create a portable ark and a tabernacle for God’s presence. Four full weekly Torah sections are devoted to spelling out those details! Unfortunately, however, all that information has become useless. Once built, the tabernacle of Moses was never to be created again.

Here enters a bit of rabbinic genius. “If words of Torah are spare in one place,” we are taught, “they are rich in another.”<sup>2</sup> If the matter is useless here, use it over there. So the sages enumerated thirty-nine categories of work that were required to construct the tabernacle: sawing wood, dying cloth, and all the rest. These thirty-nine labors (the term *me’akhhah*, or “labor,” is used in both contexts), they said, turned around to the negative, are those prohibited on the Sabbath.

On what basis could they make such a claim? You could say that they found a *but*. One passage describing

the tabernacle is interrupted with “*but* you shall keep my Sabbaths” (Exod. 31:13). This is taken to mean that the work of construction, in all its parts, was to pause in honor of the Sabbath. But did they really build the whole edifice of Sabbath law on that one word? The Talmud itself refers to the emerging Sabbath laws as “mountains hanging by a hair”<sup>3</sup> in their weak connection to any mandate found in Scripture.

Something else is going on here. The rabbis understood that all holiness comes from God, the One Who cannot be limited by either space or time. Y-H-W-H is the place of the world, filling all of the earth with glory yet remaining entirely elusive. God existed before the world came to be and will exist afterward, when all is ended. Yet that One comes to be manifest in both the spatial and temporal realms. All the rules are given for constructing sacred space. Very well, said the rabbis, those same rules turned around backward, prohibited instead of prescribed, tell us how to construct sacred time. The Sabbath, in Rabbi Heschel’s words, is “a palace in time.” Of course it is to be constructed like God’s little palace on earth, with the same set of rules.

Shabbat thus becomes a mirror image of the tabernacle or the later Temple. In the age after the Temple was destroyed, Jews made Shabbat the key defining form of

Jewish religious life. Because it was replacing the Temple, it had to look like it. Indeed, the conversation between Elisha and Meir took place in that age, just when the rules were being firmly set.

Today our needs are different and I believe that Shabbat has to take on forms appropriate to our age. Although many of the old thirty-nine categories are still useful, I offer here a simplified Shabbat for moderns: ten rules—five positive and five prohibitions. This numbering is based, of course, on the form of the ten commandments.

Try these out. Add them to your own Shabbat, whatever it currently is. See which ones work for you. Welcome others, Jews and non-Jews, to try them on for size. Be a Shabbat missionary. The world will one day thank us for it.

### Ten Pathways toward a New Shabbat

#### Do

1. Stay at home. Spend quality time with family and real friends.
2. Celebrate with others: at the table, in the synagogue, with friends or community.

3. Study or read something that will edify, challenge, or make you grow.
4. Be alone. Take some time for yourself. Check in with yourself. Review your week. Ask yourself where you are in your life.
5. Mark the beginning and end of this sacred time by lighting candles and making *kiddush* on Friday night and saying *havdalah* on Saturday night.

#### Don't

6. Don't do anything you have to do for your work life. This includes obligatory reading, homework for kids (even without writing!), unwanted social obligations, and preparing for work as well as doing your job itself.
7. Don't spend money. Separate completely from the commercial culture that surrounds us so much. This includes doing business of all sorts. No calls to the broker, no following up on ads, no paying of bills. It can all wait.
8. Don't use the computer. Turn off the iPhone or smartphone or whatever device has replaced it by the time you read this. Live and breathe for a day without checking messages. Declare your freedom

from this new master of our minds and our time.

Find the time for face-to-face conversations with people around you, without Facebook.

9. Don't travel. Avoid especially commercial travel and places like airports, hotel check-ins, and similar depersonalizing encounters. Stay free of situations in which people are likely to tell you to "have a nice day" (Shabbat already is a nice day, thank you).
10. Don't rely on commercial or canned video entertainment, including the TV as well as the computer screen. Discover what there is to do in life when you are not being entertained.



### **Chapter 5: Shabbat—Getting Off the Treadmill**

1. b. *Hagigah* 15a.
2. y. *Rosh Hashanah* 3:5
3. m. *Hagigah* 1:8.