

What Does Shabbos Even Mean to Me? Part I



Your 18Forty Holiday Guide explores the meaning and relevance behind each of the holidays in the Jewish calendar. Receive this newsletter in your inbox by subscribing [here](#). Questions or feedback? Email Rivka Bennun Kay at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

Cheshvan is the only month on the Jewish calendar with no holiday in it. That makes it the month to take up Shabbos, the one holy day that comes every week. So this guide comes in two parts, a week apart, with two questions in each. This week, Part I, asks what 25 hours cost a person who already works 60 hours a week. It also asks why the people who keep Shabbos look forward to it while others count the minutes. Next week, Part II, asks what to do when the judgment of a community or a family is the problem, and where a person starts. Then it asks the hardest question of all, in the words of the person asking it: “For me, Saturday is just another day, so what does Shabbos even mean to me?”

Dana is 29, in the fourth year of a doctorate, with a thesis chapter due Monday. She went to a Jewish day school through 12th grade. At home, Shabbos meant candles, a Friday dinner, and shul on Shabbos. In college, after a time, she let it all go. Most of the people in her lab are not Jewish. Nobody there keeps track of the sun going down except one colleague, who asked her last week to come for Shabbos dinner tonight. She said yes. It is Friday, and sundown is a little before six. At four o'clock, she is looking at the chapter of her thesis and at the same time typing a text to her colleague, trying to find a way out of the dinner. She is not feeling guilty about any of this. She has noticed the clock, the way she notices it most Fridays, and then kept working.

Since Shabbos comes every week, it does not arrive the way Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur do, once a year with a month of buildup. It is there every Friday night and Saturday whether you kept the last one or not. Many people treat it as a non-event. The Torah does the opposite. Shabbos is the fourth of the Ten Commandments in Shemot 20, and, other than Yom Kippur, it is the day the Torah treats more seriously than any other—more than Rosh Hashanah, Pesach, or any festival most people would name first. The weekend days of rest that most of the world now takes for granted descend from this one and were not a secular invention.

None of this history gets Dana to her colleague's Shabbos table, and it may not get you there either. So take the first two objections one at a time, as they look from outside the observant community.

I work 60 hours a week. Where do I find 25 more?

The people who keep Shabbos know the first objection, the cost, as well as you do, and the founder of 18Forty has said so in print. Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin wrote in an essay on 18Forty that his parents made Shabbos for him as a child. Then when he had to make it for himself as an adult he learned something Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the author of *The Sabbath*, never told him: "Making Shabbos is super stressful." The 25 hours do not come free to anyone.

Can't do, or don't have to do?

In Orthodox practice, from sundown on Friday until dark on Saturday you do not work, drive, cook, shop, write, or pick up your phone. The rules come from the Mishna's list of 39 kinds of forbidden labor. The Talmud ties those 39 to the kinds of labor that built the *Mishkan* in the desert. But knowing where they come from does not make many people want to live under them. A person who stopped keeping Shabbos because he did not want to take orders from some God he can't see, or some ancient text written millennia ago, will not come back for a longer list of prohibitions or the rationale behind them.

But some people do come back once they have a change of perspective and understand that for 25 hours nothing on that list is something they *have to do*. Someone struggling with observance once told a rabbi that he had no time for Shabbos since Saturday was his only day for errands. But this person was told that the rules of Shabbos are not that you *can't do* something, but that you *don't have to do* something. For many people that is the first thing about the day that feels like relief, even though not one rule has changed, only their perspective.

Who said I was a slave?

That relief is close to one of the two reasons the Torah itself gives for Shabbos. The Ten Commandments give two, and the second may reach you more directly than the first. In Shemot 20 the reason is creation, six days of work and a seventh of rest. Many people read the creation story as allegory and stop reading there. When Moshe repeats the commandments in Devarim 5, he contextualizes the reason for the generation that was not at Sinai. He tells this younger generation that their servants must rest as they do. He continues, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Eternal your God freed you from there." Shabbos, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "is a day of freedom even for servants, and even for domestic animals. One day in seven, no one is a slave." A slave, in that reading, is a person whose time belongs to somebody else, so that he cannot stop when he chooses.

Isn't a rule just one more master?

But there is a fair objection to that answer. To keep Shabbos fully you are not allowed to keep working when you want to keep going. That can feel like trading one master for another. The difference is in how Shabbos feels when you accept its obligations. A day off that you choose for yourself comes with guilt attached, because you could have worked and did not, without your boss's or professor's permission. But a day that your own freely chosen religious observance gives you, relieving you of all worldly obligations, carries no guilt, because the question of working never comes up, and nobody, your boss and professor included, has a claim on it. Rabbi Bashevkin said on [the 18Forty Podcast](#) that "the opportunity of halacha, and the pain of halacha, quite frankly, is that it is a collective standard." A standard you did not set for yourself is the one standard nobody can ask you to bend, and that is where the relief comes from.

What if it does not feel like my choice?

Saying that you *do not have to do* anything on Shabbos assumes that keeping Shabbos is your choice. For many people it does not feel that way. If you grew up in an observant home, or married into one, or live where everyone around you keeps it, the rules were there before any choice of yours was. On a Friday night when you would rather be out, or online, or on the road, they can feel like something family and neighbors imposed, with no choice of yours in it.

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Nobody should tell you that feels like a vacation. Neither the Torah nor the rabbis give a clean answer to a Shabbos you did not choose. One woman who keeps Shabbos with a husband who does not wrote in [an essay on 18Forty](#) that "there are few feelings worse than loneliness, and religion does not have the same beauty if someone feels lonely." In their home, she wrote, he agreed not to drive on Shabbos and to use his phone only in private. She kept her Shabbos and he kept his phone, and they found a way to share one house on Friday night. If Shabbos is imposed on you, the part that is still yours is the piece of it you make your own, that is a meal you host, a walk you take, a book you save for Saturday afternoon.

What about my boss?

Even a Shabbos you choose does not stop an employer from treating your time as his. But ask yourself when you last had a full day on which no message from work reached you and you did not check for one. For many people the answer is years, because work messages arrive 24/7 whether or not you want to see them. The people who keep Shabbos found a way out of that, and for many of them it took less willpower than they expected. What it took was the courage to say it once, out loud, to a boss or a client. Then it took repeating it the first few times somebody forgot.

One public case of telling your employer you do not work on Shabbos is Senator Joe Lieberman, who kept Shabbos through his years in the United States Senate. When people asked how he could be a senator and observe Shabbos, his answer was one he really meant: "I don't think I could be a senator and not observe Shabbat."

What do I get for the day?

The 25-hour rest on Shabbos is what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes as a palace in time. In *The Sabbath*, he writes that "the seventh day is like a palace in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere." Rabbi Sacks writes poignantly: "The sanctity of place takes second position to the holiness of time." The Jewish people lost their holy place, the Temple, nearly 2,000 years ago. In Rabbi Heschel's reading, Shabbos is the holy place they kept. Nobody has to travel to observe Shabbos or build anything. If you choose to accept this gift, it comes to your home every Friday at sundown whether or not you are ready, and it comes to Dana, with the thesis chapter half written.

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You do not have to believe in God, or in the Torah, to want what Shabbos offers. Tiffany Shlain, an internet pioneer and filmmaker, has given up screens one day a week with her family for more than a decade. She drew the practice from Shabbos and wrote in *24/6* about how her family gained "more time, productivity, connection, and presence." Shlain's book is about the 25 hours without screens and not about God. It describes what happened to one family that kept the hours and left the prayers and the rules to others.

For you, then, the 25 hours are the one stretch of the week in which nobody is supposed to be getting ahead or falling behind, you included. For a person who is working 50 or 60 hours a week, that may be something you have never had. The people who look forward to Friday and observe Shabbos think the cost is worth it.

Why do they look forward to it while I count the minutes?

Rabbi Bashevkin, introducing [an 18Forty Podcast episode on the books of Shabbos](#), said that “the mantra that we have in our house is that every single Shabbos is a vacation,” and he said it as the father of small children who does not get many actual vacations. To many people who left Shabbos behind, that is hard to believe.

Not everyone who grew up with Shabbos remembers it that way. Some kept it alone, in a house where nobody else cared much about it, bored and stuck inside while their friends were elsewhere. For them Shabbos already has a feeling attached to it, and the feeling is boredom, which can make coming back harder than never having kept it at all.

What did they get that I did not?

Rabbi Bashevkin was born into a home that kept Shabbos. In [an essay he published on 18Forty](#), he describes the Shabbos of his childhood as magic and says the magic “was a product of Shabbos being made for me.” Then, in his 20s, single and out of yeshiva, with no parents making it for him, Shabbos no longer amazed him. He did not like arranging meals, and he did not like being a guest in other people’s homes. In his words, “there is nothing quite as lonely as being homesick in your own home.” He was still keeping Shabbos the whole time. What had changed was that he was keeping it without the family that had made it for him.

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The Torah itself treats Shabbos as something a community does together. When Moshe gives the command in [Shemot 35](#), the verse opens with him gathering the whole community to hear it. Rabbi Bashevkin points out on [Talmud Daily](#) that no other commandment is introduced that way. On the same episode he says that Shabbos “is not a solo sport,” and that anyone who has kept it alone knows that “It can feel very isolating. It can feel very constricting.” So if you tried Shabbos by yourself and counted the minutes, you tried it without the one thing the people who keep it say it needs.

Next week’s guide takes up the other two questions: what to do when the community you left is the problem, and why Dana, who has not missed Shabbos, should bother.
