The internet revolution and Jewish law

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A number of years ago, I gave a sermon on Shabbat Vayakhel[1] In it, I explored notions of work and rest, asking whether we can find ways to choose not to work. One congregant heard it as a personal challenge. Recently, she wrote me this account:

> So, as a Reform Jew (and one who came to my involvement as a Jew very late in life), I never really thought of how I would observe Shabbat. Sure, I went to services every Friday night that I could (and sometimes on Saturday mornings) and we lit candles every Friday night but that was the extent of my observation of Shabbat. Until, one Friday night about five years ago, when [you] suggested during a sermon that we just stop doing one thing on Saturdays to observe the Sabbath.
>
> Because I tend to work all the time, I had to think a bit about this; finally though, I decided to stop e-mailing. This was difficult in the beginning but not for long. Observing Shabbat in this way has allowed me to spend more time really relaxing and thinking about my blessings which are many…It has made a very big difference in my life.[2]

This congregant's experience led me to take this paper as an opportunity to explore Reform Judaism's teachings on Shabbat, as they have been written for congregants looking to observe it. Specifically, her experience with email led me to a study of how these teachings might relate to our own modern issues of connectivity, work and rest. How might a committed lay person – or member of the clergy – approach Shabbat, guided by our movement's writings? For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the sixty years of the post-WWII period. I will begin with a discussion of significant statements about Shabbat observance over

this time period; turn to a consideration of what might be new or different about the issue of connectivity; and conclude with reflections as to how we might approach the internet and halakhah on Shabbat, with a focus on personal Shabbat observance.

In 1952, Rabbi Israel Bettan wrote a responsum which addressed a number of Shabbat-related questions together.[3] He opened this responsum, titled "Sabbath Observance," with the following observation: "For some time now, many of the questions directed to the Committee on Responsa have had to do with situations in which traditional observance of the Shabbat is involved." Those questions included whether dances could be permitted in the Temple on a Friday night, or whether a synagogue could sponsor a teenage baseball team's practice on a Saturday afternoon, despite Orthodox objection.

Bettan offers a summary of rabbinic law on these topics, focusing on leniencies, as well as observing that in the absence of a widespread five day work week, the major issue for many Jews is the requirement that they work on Shabbat. He then makes the following argument:

> Yet, however wide an area of freedom we may still discover within the narrow limits of traditional law, no one who is acquainted with the vast bulk of restrictive measures designed to keep the Sabbath inviolate will question the accuracy of the Mishnaic observation, that the Sabbath laws represent "mountains suspended from a hair" (Chagiga 10a). But, unfortunately, we have chosen to avert our gaze from these mountains. We prefer to ignore their presence. In doing so, however, we have willfully turned away from the opportunity that was ours to bring the institution of the Sabbath under the searching light of liberal thought…

> The principle that fences must be built around the law, which has led to the enactment of countless precautionary regulations, is a principle that we today must boldly reject in the interest of a saner observance of the Sabbath. Instead, we should reaffirm and employ as our constant guide the more important and fruitful Rabbinic principle: That the Sabbath has been placed in our control, and that we are not under the control of the Sabbath (Yoma 85b).
> Taking our stand on this principle, we shall, of course, continue to stress the twofold nature of our Sabbath, namely, that it is our Jewish day of rest, and that, moreover, it is a day dedicated to the delights of the soul. But we shall not seek, in the name of Judaism, to deny men the freedom to perform such necessary acts and to engage in such additional delights as they have learned to associate with their periods of rest. In an age like ours, when we have come to view sports and games of all sorts as proper forms of relaxation on rest days; to hark back to the puritanic rigors of the Rabbinic Sabbath is to call in question the relevancy of religion to modern life.

At the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, then, the Reform position on Shabbat observance – as expressed by Bettan – was to emphasize the need to move away from the traditional system of Shabbat restrictions. The traditional categories of work were all determined by the occupations of Jews in the Biblical and Rabbinic periods, with additional restrictions built on the precautionary basis of fences around the law.
To be relevant, Judaism had to abandon these "puritanic rigors," and expand its notion of rest (rather than work) to allow for new definitions.

Rest in the modern world, according to Bettan, included "necessary acts" and "additional delights" that traditionally were

forbidden, but could no longer be denied. The fundamental question of this paper is how Reform Jews might determine what acts are necessary or unnecessary, diminishing or delightful, as we try to observe the timelessness of Shabbat in our own particular time.

Twenty years after Bettan's responsum, the CCAR published *A Shabbat Manual*, as the culmination of the work of a Sabbath Committee under the leadership of Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut. Whereas both Bettan and Plaut are striving to make Shabbat viable for modern Reform Jews, Bettan's emphasis is on freeing them from traditional strictures, while Plaut's emphasis is on rediscovering the principles behind them. Much of this difference is attributable to the different reasons for which they are writing, but the divergence seems to have deeper roots. On the very first page of Plaut's guide, the loss of the "discipline" of Shabbat is lamented as "both tragic and unnecessary"; the manual itself is offered as "our beginning in the effort to recover Shabbat observance as an enhancement of Jewish life."[4]

Bettan had suggested that, "many of us might even today be true Sabbath observers in the essential meaning of the term, if we could but rescue the Sabbath from the host of unreasonable restrictions which mar its character and weaken its appeal to the modern mind."[5] From Plaut's vantage point, this revitalization of Shabbat does not seem to have happened:

Among large numbers of our people only a few negative Shabbat commandments are still observed. We do not have funerals or weddings on the seventh day, but otherwise there are more exceptions than observances. Of the positive commandments, equally little remains, like the lighting of the candles, a simple *Kiddush*, and an occasional visit to the synagogue.[6]

Despite the arrival of the five day workweek (Plaut even refers to a four day week), Shabbat is largely neglected. Plaut's call therefore is for something more substantive:

> Beyond these remnants must lie a renewed commitment of the Jew to his people and to his future, and in a deeper sense, a commitment also to the God of Israel. Since we can no longer make this commitment under the force of communal disapproval or penalty, we must make it by free decision. We must do it because this is how we *want* to live, and because we know that this is how we ought to live. Here the concept of mitzvah enters… For us, mitzvah means that God offers an opportunity to introduce an "ought" into our existence."[7]

So what "ought" the Reform Jew do on Shabbat, and why? Plaut delineates five purposes of Shabbat observance, and connects each one with a theme central to biblical or rabbinic understandings of Shabbat.[8] Here, I list Plaut's five purposes, with the English titles and Hebrew transliterations he provides, along with my own translation of the Hebrew:

1. Awareness of the World (*zikaron lema'aseh bereshit*: remembrance of the works of creation)
2. Commitment to Freedom (*zecher litzi'at mitzrayim:* remembrance of the going out from Egypt)
3. Identity with the Jewish People (*berit*: covenant)
4. Enhancement of the Person (*kedushah, menuchah, oneg*: holiness, rest, joy)
5. Dedication to Peace (*Shabbat shalom*: Sabbath peace)

From these purposes, Plaut goes on to catalogue specific mitzvot – in his words, "Shabbat Opportunities." Despite the creative language, he is clear what he means about commandments:

> You must always remember that you are performing mitzvot. It is not a question of "how you feel about it" at any given time. You may not be "in the mood." But being a Jew is not always convenient or easy. The performance of mitzvot ought to be the pattern of one's life. The more deep-rooted such a pattern, the more intense and regular one's performance of mitzvot, the richer and truer will be one's life as a Jew.[9]

Plaut includes a list of positive and negative commandments for liberal Jews related to Shabbat. The *mitzvot lo ta'aseh*, negative commandments, are listed with the caveat that "experience and personal circumstance" will indicate whether certain specific activities are appropriate for any given individual: not engaging in gainful work; not performing housework; not shopping; not participating in social events or public events during worship hours; and avoiding all public activity which violates or gives the appearance of violating *Shemirat Shabbat*.[10] Notably, whereas Bettan, in his responsum, cites Yoma 85b to insist "[t]hat the Sabbath has been placed in our control, and that we are not under the control of the Sabbath," Plaut cites the words of Ahad HaAm: "More than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel."[11]

The next Reform publication which addressed Shabbat observance in a significant way was Peter Knobel's *Gates of the Seasons*, published twenty years after Plaut's manual. Knobel frames his discussion of Shabbat by noting the importance of two Shabbat commandments, as found in the two different versions of the Ten Commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy: one is connected with creation and the other with redemption; one uses the word *zachor*, which he defines as spiritual rest and sanctification, and the other uses the word *shamor*, which he defines as physical rest and the avoidance of labor. Knobel then states:

The primary goal of Shabbat observance is the avoidance of gainful work and of all activities which do not contribute to the celebration of Shabbat as a day of joy (*Oneg*), a day of holiness (*Kedushah*), and a day of rest (*Menuchah*). Shabbat is a day of leisure in which time is used to express our humanness.[12]

Knobel then revises Plaut's list of Shabbat *mitzvot*. Knobel's list is longer than Plaut's, and includes more of what might be called the ethical *mitzvot* in addition to the ritual ones. Concerning refraining from work, Knobel recognizes the challenge of defining what qualifies as work that should be avoided on Sabbat:

Abstinence from work is a major expression of Shabbat observance; however, it is no simple matter to define work today. Certain activities which some do to earn a living, others do for relaxation or to express their creativity. Clearly, though, one should avoid one's normal occupation or profession on Shabbat whenever possible and engage only in those types of activities which enhance the *Oneg* (joy), *Menuchah* (rest), and *Kedushah* (holiness) of the day.[13]

Whereas for Plaut the definition of work was relatively straightforward, for Knobel it is not.

The question of what is rest and what is work comes to the fore in the *Gates of Shabbat*, written by Rabbi Mark Shapiro and published by the CCAR in 1996. *Gates of Shabbat* is intended as a new guidebook to observing Shabbat for Reform Jews, based on Plaut's efforts a generation before. The tone is noticeably different, and this difference is acknowledged in one of the final sections, "Thinking in Terms of Mitzvah/Commandment for Reform Jews." Whereas Plaut defines *mitzvah* as "what a Jew ought to do in response to God and the tradition of our people," Shapiro suggests

that a sense of *mitzvah* is a goal of Reform Shabbat observance, but not its starting point. He writes:

> The hope [behind this new manual] was that Reform Jews had a text which helped them encounter the beauty and joy of Shabbat, they would embrace Shabbat as a necessity in their lives. In other words, *Shabbat would become a mitzvah for Reform Jews*... Hopefully, your experience of Shabbat will add a dimension of sanctity to your life that nothing else can replace. When that happens, *you ought to begin to feel commanded to observe Shabbat because you would not want to do anything but that*. At that time what you do will not only strengthen you as a Jew, but also strengthens the Jewish people.[14]

In keeping with this approach, the actual listing of Shabbat *mitzvot* – which is almost an exact replica of the one in *Gates of the Seasons* – appears towards the end of *Gates of Shabbat*. Instead, the center of Shapiro's guide is a section on "Establishing Definitions for Work and Rest on Shabbat." This is defined as the greatest challenge facing "the contemporary Jew who wants to observe Shabbat," and yet Shapiro insists that "these very worthwhile tensions are the creative dynamic out of which you can fashion your Shabbat observance."[15] The itemization of *mitzvot* has yielded its place to a focus on what might inspire the reader to begin to explore Shabbat observance.

Shapiro's guide then offers three different models for work and rest on Shabbat: the walker, who aims at a complete change of pace on Shabbat, withdrawing from work and human creation; the museumgoer, who focuses on refreshing the soul, and celebrating freedom from necessity; and the painter, who uses creativity to express a sense of liberation. Although these models are radically different from each other in terms of the traditional *mitzvot* of

Shabbat, Shapiro argues that what is essential is what they share: "The walker, the museumgoer, and the painter are authentic Reform Jews because the decisions they reach are made with sincerity, commitment, and a desire to draw on the resources of Judaism in order to enrich contemporary life."[16]

The reader is encouraged to make similar decisions, deciding on his or her own definitions of work and rest. To help the reader do so, the guide suggests six questions, similar but not identical to the five principles delineated by Plaut. Shapiro's six questions are:[17]

1. Will this activity lend Shabbat a quality of kedusha/holiness?
2. Is this activity done for its own sake or is it merely a means to an end?
3. Does this activity imbue Shabbat with a sense of liberation?
4. Does this activity help cultivate a sense of wonder at God's creation?
5. Does this activity advance the spirit of Shabbat embodied in the home and synagogue celebrations of the seventh day?
6. Does this activity bring me closer to the Jewish people?

Fundamental to this approach is the assumption that definitions of work and rest change. Like Bettan, who argued that the traditional halakhic definitions of work were based on the social and economic context in which they were written, so too here: "Reform Jews depart from the traditional definitions of work and rest because we believe they do not represent the final word on Jewish practice."[18]

Mark Washofsky's guide, *Jewish Living*, came out four years after the *Gates of Shabbat*, and consolidates the mitzvot of Shabbat observance into four: remembering Shabbat through liturgy; observing Shabbat by refraining from work; and honoring and

delighting in Shabbat through special food, clothes, and use of time.[19] Washofsky acknowledges that "the idea of *mitzvah*, of commandment, is deeply problematic in Jewish theology," but at the same time, "no matter how "Reform" our Judaism, it would be Jewishly unthinkable without the *mitzvot* of Shabbat."[20] He draws on the earlier works, especially *Gates of the Seasons* and *Gates of Shabbat*, to outline what contemporary Reform Jewish Shabbat observance might look like. Washofsky concludes:

> What unifies these alternatives is the conception that Shabbat is a day that is not to be treated like any other. It is not merely a day off; it is rather an expanse of time that is holy, different in quality and essence from all other days, consecrated both to God and to us for the purpose of our fulfillment as Jews.[21]

Finally, in 2007 came the URJ's Embracing Shabbat Initiative, based on Rabbi Eric Yoffie's biennial sermon. This initiative was primarily focused on Shabbat synagogue observance, and in particular Shabbat morning services. But Yoffie also spoke to the place of Shabbat in the practice of individual Jews:

> But most important of all, Reform Jews are considering Shabbat because they need Shabbat. In our 24/7 culture, the boundary between work time and leisure time has been swept away, and the results are devastating. Do we really want to live in a world where we make love in half the time and cook every meal in the microwave? When work expands to fill all our evenings and weekends, everything suffers, including our health. But families take the worst hit. The average parent spends twice as long dealing with email as playing with his children.
> For our stressed-out, sleep-deprived families, the Torah's mandate to rest looks relevant and sensible. Our tradition does not instruct us to stop working altogether on Shabbat; after all, it takes a certain amount of effort to study, pray and go to synagogue. But

we are asked to abstain from the work that we do to earn a living, and instead to reflect, to enjoy and to take a stroll through the neighborhood. We are asked to put aside those Blackberries and stop gathering information, just as the ancient Israelites stopped gathering wood. We are asked to stop running around long enough to see what God is doing.

And this most of all: In synagogue and at home, we are asked to give our kids, our spouse and our friends the undivided attention that they did not get from us the rest of the week. On Shabbat we speak to our children of their hopes and dreams. We show them that we value them for who they are and not for the grades they get or the prizes they win. During the week we pursue our goals; on Shabbat we learn simply to be.[22]

Yoffie insists that Reform Shabbat observance will not be "neo-frumkeit" or "an endless list of Shabbat prohibitions;" like Betton, Yoffie argues that "we fled that kind of Shabbat, and for good reason."[23] Rather, it will be creative, emphasizing the positive mitzvot over the negative ones, revisiting the definitions of work and rest, and recognizing that no approach will fit everyone. The resulting publication, *Embracing Shabbat*, thus offers many texts and suggestions for study, but unlike the CCAR publications, it is not a guide.

One might see *Embracing Judaism* as the end point; following the Reform model of informed choice, the individual studies and decides. But the "worthwhile tensions" referred to in *Gates of Shabbat* are prominent. In particular, what does it mean to put aside our Blackberries and stop gathering information, if Reform Shabbat observance is to be characterized by positive, and not negative, commandments? What are we to make of the fact that groups outside the world of organized religion – most notably, Reboot and its Sabbath Manifesto [24] – are calling precisely for a

day of rest which avoids technology?[25] What is it about the use of technology, and connectivity and the internet above all, that brings the question of Shabbat observance to the fore?

Much has been written in recent years about the effects of constantly being connected to the internet, primarily through mobile devices, and all that entails: the prevalence of social media such as Facebook and twitter, and the constant access to email and work. In addition to the flurry of articles about Reboot's National Day of Unplugging (the second one was observed on the Shabbat of March 4-5, 2011), the New York Times ran a series called "Your Brain on Computers," and books like Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* and Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* are being widely read and discussed.[26] The argument found in many of these books and articles is that our use of the internet – and in particular, the practices of multitasking and constantly looking for new information – are altering everything from our brain chemistry to our relationships with our children and spouses. The titles of the articles in the New York Times series are indicative of the issues that they raise: "An Ugly Toll of Technology: Impatience and Forgetfulness," "The Risks of Parenting While Plugged In," "Digital Devices Deprive Brain of Needed Downtime," and "Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction," to name a few.[27]

In addition to the growing body of scientific literature is anecdotal evidence. Individuals who experiment with "unplugging" for limited periods of time use words like "unbearable" to describe their experience.[28] Rabbis are far from immune; if anything, the extent to which our work requires multitasking might make us more vulnerable. There is the story of the rabbi whose toddler dropped his cell phone in the toilet when he kept using it on his day off;[29] the rabbi who made a Rosh Hashanah resolution not to

use the internet on Friday nights, but couldn't resist checking Facebook and Twitter; and my own experience, even on maternity leave with an "out of office" message set on my computer, of checking email almost constantly.

In 1971, Rabbi Morrison David Bial wrote *Liberal Judaism at Home*, and in it he contrasts traditional and liberal Shabbat observance. He observes: "Most willingly, the traditional Jew separates himself from much that most Liberal Jews consider necessary, the telephone and radio, all mechanical transport… cooking, smoking, and much more."[30] This is evocative of Bettan's reference in his responsum to "necessary acts and additional delights." The word "necessary" is notable. From this vantage point, it could be argued that the issues raised by the internet are nothing new; there are many aspects of weekday life which liberal Jews are not willing or wanting to abandon on Shabbat. However, when it comes to the issue of connectivity, it is worth noting that this phenomenon is not limited to the liberal Jewish world. Within Orthodoxy, the phenomenon has emerged of teens observing "half shabbos," in which they keep using social media on Shabbat, arguing that they can't communicate without it.[31]

Notes

1. Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, "Choosing to Work, Choosing to Rest: *Vayakhel* 5765."

2. Personal correspondence,with Jane Dystel March 24, 2011.

3. Rabbi Israel Bettan, "Sabbath Observance," Walter Jacob (ed.), *American Reform Responsa 1889-1983* (excerpted from the CCAR Journal, Vol. LXII, 1952, pp. 129-132).

4. W. Gunther Plaut (ed.), *A Shabbat Manual*, New York, 1972, p.1.

5. Bettan, *op cit.*

6. Plaut, p.4.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid, pp.5-6.

9. Ibid, p.8.

10. Ibid, pp.11-13.

11. Ibid, p.13.

12. Peter Knobel (ed.), *Gates of the Seasons: A Guide to the Jewish Year*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York, 1983, p.18.

13. Ibid., p.23.

14. Mark Dov Shapiro, *Gates of Shabbat: A Guide for Observing Shabbat*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York, 1996, p.92.

15. Ibid., pp.49 - 50.

16. Ibid., p.54.

17. Ibid, p.55.

18. Ibid, p.57.

19. Mark Washofsky, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*, New York, 2001, p.72.

20. Ibid., p.74.

21. Ibid., p.84.

22.. Eric Yoffie, "Adapted from a Presidential Sermon, Delivered at the 69th General Assembly, December 15, 2007," Sue Ann Wasserman (ed.), *Embracing Shabbat: 2007 Biennial initiative*, New York, 2007, p.12.

23. Ibid.

24. "The Sabbath Manifesto was created by a group of Jewish artists in search of a modern way to observe a weekly day of rest. The group are all members of Reboot, a non-profit group designed to "reboot" the cultures, traditions and rituals of Jewish life." See http://rebooters.net/.

25. Reboot's "Ten Principles" overlap significantly with many of the lists of Shabbat mitzvot in Reform writings: *1. Avoid Technology 2. Connect with your loved ones 3. Nurture your health 4. Get outside 5. Avoid commerce 6. Light candles 7. Drink wine 8. Eat bread 9. Find silence 10. Give back.* In the"About" section, the authors describe their aims as follows: "Way back when, God said, "On the seventh day thou shalt rest." The meaning behind it was simple: Take a break. Call a timeout. Find some balance. Recharge. Somewhere along the line, however, this mantra for living faded from modern consciousness. The idea of unplugging every seventh day now feels tragically close to impossible. Who has time to take time off? We need eight days a week to get tasks accomplished, not six. The Sabbath Manifesto was developed in the same spirit as the Slow Movement, slow food, slow living, by a small group of artists, writers, filmmakers and media professionals who, while not particularly religious, felt a collective need to fight back against our increasingly fast-paced way of living. The idea is to take time off, deadlines and paperwork be damned. In the Manifesto, we've adapted our ancestors' rituals by carving out one day per week to unwind, unplug, relax, reflect, get outdoors, and get with loved ones. The ten principles are to be observed one day per week, from sunset to sunset. We invite you to practice, challenge and/or help shape what we're creating." See http://sabbathmanifesto.org

26. *Your Brain on Computers*, a series of seven articles by various authors from the *New York Times*, June 7, 2010-Nov. 21, 2010. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*, New York, 2010. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other*, New York, 2011.

27. The following is a list of the seven articles in the series, in chronological order: Marjorie Connelly, "More Americans Sense a Downside to an Always Plugged-In Existence," June 7, 2010; Tara Parker-Pope, "An Ugly Toll of Technology: Impatience and Forgetfulness," June 7, 2010; Matt Richtel, "Attached to Technology and Paying a Price," June 7, 2010; Julie Scelfo, "The Risks of Parenting While Plugged In," June 10, 2010; Matt Richtel, "Outdoors and Out of Reach, Studying the Brain," August 16, 2010; Matt Richtel, "Digital Devices Deprive Brain of Needed Downtime," August 25, 2010; Matt Richtel, "Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction," November 21, 2010.

28. Tara Parker-Pope, "An Ugly Toll of Technology."

29. Rabbi Michael Latz, personal communication (Facebook message, March 28, 2011). "Basic story: I was working too much. Promised to take Noa to the zoo on Sunday morning. Then took one call after another saying "5 more minutes." after 2 hours, she got fed up, took my cell phone, and plopped it in the toilet. Best lesson of my rabbinate! :-)"

30. Morrison David Bial, *Liberal Judaism at Home: The Practices of Modern Reform Judaism*, Summit, New Jersey, 1967, p.104.

31. Miriam Shaviv, "New ways of wishing 'gd Shbs'," thejc.com (Jewish Chronicle), Jan. 28, 2011.