

DAY OF REST

I have a bumper sticker on my car that reads: “The Labor Movement. The Folks who Brought you the Weekend.” Long before unions won first a six, and then a five day work week, the Jews came up with the concept of “A Day of Rest.” I assume, before the Ten Commandments, most people worked from dawn to dusk seven days a week. No day was different from any other. It took Moses (or some other very creative individual) to provide a rationale for a day off from back-breaking labor.

The Fourth Commandment states: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it, you shall not do any work...” Since God created the world in six days, and on the seventh day he rested, He therefore blessed it and made it holy. Therefore, we, and our children, and our servants, and our livestock should rest on the seventh day. Whatever explanation works for you. Observant Jews make rest on Saturday a must. I suspect there are more questions about what constitutes work on Shabbes than on any of the other Ten Commandments.

I have told the story over and over of my mother leaving her first job soon after she came to Toronto at the age of 16. She was a skilled sewer and had found work as an alteration tailor at Eaton’s Department Store. It was Friday and the foreman told her that she would have to come in the next day because they were very busy. She told him that she made it clear when she started that she does not work on Saturday. He said she would have to. She replied that she is leaving and wants her pay, and she quit.

Somewhere I heard that rather than “Jews keep the Sabbath,” “Sabbath keeps the Jews.” All the rituals, prohibitions, and traditions, that Jews observe, that makes them different, reinforce their identity. However, over the years, my observance has been diminishing, even though my identity as a Jew is as strong as ever.

To extend the parallel with which I started: It took a long time for organized labor to win a five day week. Many factories and stores worked a six day week. (Thank God that Christians picked up on the concept of “a day of rest.”) The norm became a five day, 40 hour week, with time and a half paid for overtime. When companies figured they can make more money working seven days a week (even paying overtime) they did it, and something happened to our society. There was no longer a difference between weekdays and the weekend. Which leads me to the point of this piece:

Since I have retired, every day has become a day of rest. And since I seldom go to shul on Saturday any more, the holiness of Saturday has diminished.