



Sabbath

The custom of the Sabbath being on the seventh day began in Genesis when “God ceased from all the work of the creation that God had done” (Gen. 2:2) on the seventh day. Most Christians observe the Sabbath on Sunday, Muslims on Friday and Jews on Saturday. These days, everyone except the banks, is open for business on Sundays. Friday and Saturday have always been business days for shoppers and others. If Friday, Saturday and Sunday are business days, somebody has to work them. So, when do we get a Sabbath? And why do we need one?

Let’s talk about the meaning of Sabbath. Most American English speakers mean “Sunday” when they say “Sabbath,” but there is nothing inherent in the word to mean that particular day. In fact, “Sabbath” derives from the Hebrew word *shabbat*, meaning “to cease, to stop.” It is this meaning that dictated the Sabbath customs of my childhood.

When I was young in the San Gabriel Valley, we had a big day on Saturdays: grocery shopping, shopping for any gifts we might need to buy or new clothes and shoes, plus cleaning the house from top to bottom. My sister and I always tried to get in a couple of games of cards as well.

Sunday was Church Day. We’d get up and eat a cold breakfast and then head over to Sunday School. Next came the Church Service, where I was convinced we had the most boring pastor in the world. When we went back home, we had lunch that had been slow cooked overnight in the oven that was left on from the day before. During the afternoon, we were not allowed to watch TV or play cards, or to go outside to play. We could listen to records of hymns, sermons, or other sacred music. We could read – anything we wanted! Dinner was generally leftovers from the noon meal. Even if we’d been allowed to go out, there was no place to go. The stores, banks, most restaurants and even the movie theater were closed.

On Monday, it was back to business as normal. We could watch TV, play cards, play outside with our friends . . . but, we also had to go to school. That often spoiled the whole day.

As an adult convert to Judaism, my Sunday Sabbath has become a Saturday *Shabbat*. I still eat meals slow cooked in the oven that was left on low from the day before. I still don't play cards or watch TV, and generally listen to only Jewish music or the hymns I still love. But, *shabbat* is not the empty day that the Sabbath was for me as a child. I study Torah and discuss it with others. My Torah study includes both Jews and Christians, and everyone's view is heard and discussed. We don't all agree, but we all learn from one another. I rest and I read and I spend time with family.

It is worth remembering that the first time Sabbath observance came into being was when the Hebrew Children left Egypt. They were slaves no more. Slaves do not ever get a day off. We can take this one day each week. *Shabbat* was a way of reminding the Hebrews that they were free.

Ahad Ha-am, a nineteenth century Jewish philosopher said, "More than Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews." I believe this is true for all people who observe, keep, remember the Sabbath. It is a day of rest from one's regular work; a day to forget our paycheck to paycheck existence. Instead, we feed our spirits with rest and consideration of things that normally take a backseat in our lives. There are those who spend the day gardening, or hiking, or playing with the children, going on a date with their significant other, reading, writing, enjoying music or movies. Whether your sabbath is religious or secular, it is a celebration of your freedom. And, for many of us, it is the weekend break that keeps us sane and able to continue with the Monday through Friday toil.

In this age of email, cell phone browsers, personal data assistants, pagers and instant communication, many people no longer separate one day from the others. More and more people are constantly tied to their work by these modern conveniences. And so, once again in a new time, having a sabbath is an indicator of our freedom. And it is an indicator that we know the importance of taking time for ourselves to rest and recharge, to reconnect with our friends and loved ones, to not work.