

Sabbath Practice as Political Resistance

Building the Religious Counterculture

BY ANA LEVY-LYONS

ONE THING Abraham Joshua Heschel and Karl Marx had in common, aside from having both been spectacularly bearded Eastern European Jews, is the shared insight that time is the ultimate form of human wealth on this earth. Without time, all other forms of wealth are meaningless. It is this insight about time—patently obvious but frequently forgotten—that makes keeping a Sabbath day both spiritually profound and politically radical. To reclaim time is to be rich. To reclaim a full day every week is to be among the 1 percent. Sabbath practice is also one of the most

unambiguously articulated of all the commandments in the Hebrew Bible (even making the top ten!), and yet very few of the “people of the book” actually keep a Sabbath—only traditionally observant Jews, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Mormons (except for Mitt Romney). Perhaps keeping this particular commandment is just too hard.

Surplus Time in a Capitalist Society

While Marx certainly did not intend to write a spiritual text when he wrote *Capital* in 1867, he ended up producing a work that has survived into the new millennium precisely because it speaks such deep spiritual truths about the meaning of human life. Marx’s books are still on the shelves at Barnes & Noble because we recognize ourselves and our modern woes in their pages. Like Scripture, they have long outlived the debunking of their factual details. Marx wails a prophetic lament on behalf of his society. He holds up a mirror, showing how human time—human life—is broken

down, appropriated, and devoured by the “boundless thirst” of capitalism. He describes the “despotic bell” of the workplace that wrenches people (mere “personifications of labor time”) from their homes. In capitalism, free time is a waste or, at best, the necessary evil of preparation for more productivity. Marx describes how technology, rather than freeing us from labor, creates an increasingly frenetic pace of work—the need to milk more and more value from a human hour to “close the pores” of time.

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A family prepares to break challah at a Shabbat dinner. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described the Jewish Sabbath as a “palace in time” that allows individuals to “lay down the profanity of clattering commerce.”

Certainly we recognize this phenomenon today: that somehow in our high-tech world, we are all feverishly, dizzyingly busy. Because exactly as Marx described, any surplus time created by labor-saving technology is immediately sucked back into the system to create more value—more money, more goods, more innovation. We, the people, never actually receive the surplus time *as* time. Indeed, although the labor movement has brought us the weekend, we typically spend weekends in a flurry of acquisition, preparation, consumption, and productivity. Stopping is not an option. This is almost as true for the wealthy as for anyone. While the wealthy could technically “choose” to stop working or work less, they generally don’t. There’s always a mortgage (or a few) to pay and status to maintain, things to buy, and, perhaps most important, a general lack of anything better to do. Once we’ve been dehumanized long enough by the insatiable engine of secular acquisition and achievement, it’s hard to go back.

Embezzling Time

A century later, Heschel picked up where Marx left off, lamenting how our time—our lifeblood—is stolen from us. But Heschel approaches the question from a mystical, religious perspective. In his 1951 book, *The Sabbath*, he writes about the Jewish Sabbath—the mirror image of Marx’s dystopia—the twenty-five hours, from sundown Friday until three stars are visible in the sky on Saturday, devoted to prayer, family, community, pleasure, and awe. During this time, we do not work, discuss work, spend money, touch money, travel, strive to self-improve, tackle thorny problems, create things, or destroy things. We do nothing “useful” in the ordinary sense of the word. On this day the pores of time open and the world breathes. Heschel writes in the rabbinic tradition, describing the Sabbath as a gift from God, a “palace in time,” a living presence that enters the world bringing a whiff of eternity. He writes in the language of bliss and surrender.

And while Heschel probably did not intend to write a political text any more than Marx intended to write a spiritual one, the contrast between Heschel’s description of the Sabbath day and the world of power, control, and commerce could not be more pointed. The social/political battleground is clearly staked out. Heschel writes:

He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life.

Embezzling his own life! What does it mean to embezzle one’s own life? The Wikipedia description of embezzlement, which seems as good as any, reads, “Embezzlement is the act of dishonestly withholding assets for the purpose of theft by an individual to whom such assets have been entrusted to be used for other purposes.” The asset in question here is time. Heschel is warning that when we remain embroiled in commerce day in and day out, we are withholding, for the purposes of theft, *time* that has been entrusted to us by God to be used for other purposes. Those purposes may include awakening consciousness and deepening relationships, wisdom, and ecstasy. If the idea of time belonging to God is problematic for you, think of it this way instead: Your precious time on this earth belongs to your deepest, truest self—the baby who was you, who precipitated out of the universe with wide eyes and infinite promise. The baby wanted to play all day in life’s playground, to be held in loving arms, to nurse, to giggle, to feel soft blankets against her skin, to simply lie on a bed and watch a ceiling fan go round and round. But time—the rightful property of that baby—gets embezzled by your adult self, who spends it all recklessly working, racing, consuming. The baby is robbed of all her wealth.

The Sabbath is a reclaiming of time for God and for our inner baby. It is a reestablishment of a primordial birthright. At its best, the Sabbath allows the spiritual hippie child in us to come out and play. It’s a taste of an infinite present. We get to light candles, linger over meals with loved ones, take aimless walks through the town, run yelling on a beach, roll in the grass, read Rumi and Thomas Merton and Torah, sing our hearts out



An inescapable fixture in our society, clocks wrench us from our homes by reminding us of our duty to work. Marx decried the “despotic bell” of the workplace and showed how human time is appropriated by the “boundless thirst” of capitalism.



Why does the idea of halting all “productive” work, even for a day, terrify so many of us? Are we afraid that, upon returning to our daily lives, we will no longer find the oppressive aspects of our society to be bearable?

on our front stoops, get sticky from eating ripe peaches, dance at worship services, pray, daydream, talk, make love, sleep. Pleasure. Community. Love. We get to luxuriate in life’s fountain of blessings.

No Ordinary Vacation

On the surface, this all sounds like innocuous, good, clean fun. A little harmless R&R. It may even sound quaint and archaic, like something from a bygone era that we post-moderns no longer need. And ironically, Marx probably discarded the idea of the Sabbath as just another opiate—a momentary escape and brief therapy from a world where we are constantly exploited. He would say that the Sabbath (and religion in general) is part of capitalism’s “corrective” effect, like holidays and weekends—that is, capitalism band-aids the worst parts of the workers’ exploitation and compensates them just enough so that their oppression becomes bearable and they don’t revolt.

But to equate the Sabbath with an ordinary vacation is to mistake its essence and its revolutionary potential. The goal of a Sabbath practice is not to patch us up and send us back out to the violent secular world, but to represent in the *now* what redemption looks like, what justice looks like, what a compassionate social order looks like. It is to reconstruct the rest of time from the viewpoint of the Sabbath as unjust and untenable. Granted, the Sabbath traditions of some religious communities merely reinscribe the oppressions and exploitations of the secular world—excluding women, for example, from the domestic-duties hiatus that men enjoy. But a truly egalitarian Sabbath that lifts up a holy vision of the world to come performs deeply political work: it builds an “outside” to the current world. The self that emerges from such a Sabbath and reenters the week is a changed self—a newly radicalized self who can no longer tolerate injustice. Oppression does not become more bearable as Marx feared, but rather becomes unbearable. The question becomes this: once they’ve seen Paris, how you gonna keep ‘em down on the farm?

People get this intuitively. Mention the idea of a full Sabbath practice to the average American and the reaction is quite revealing. Typically, it’s terror. When we create breathing space in our week, all kinds of unwelcome feelings and thoughts can arise—feelings of despair or dissatisfaction with the world that we would rather leave buried under a mountain of tasks and vapid pleasures. When I told a high-octane lawyer friend of mine that my family keeps Shabbat each week and explained that during this time we don’t work or spend money or run errands, he shook his head and said, “Wow. That sounds terrifying.”

My friend was undoubtedly imagining all the things he had to get done. It’s hard enough, he was probably thinking, to get everything done in seven days. Subtracting a day a week would be catastrophic. The deposition to prepare, the dry cleaning to be dropped off, the research required to buy a mattress, taxes to be filed, a haircut to procure, the show to watch, the hallway lightbulb to be replaced—all these feel immutable to him (as such things do to most of us). The whispered voices of fear are loud in our ears, warning of the social costs we will pay, how our world may spin out of control, the threat of failures. Free time has to squeeze in around these immutable constraints, or so the thinking goes.

So when the Sabbath comes along and insists that in fact *it* is immutable and all else is negotiable, the world is turned upside down. It is the non-negotiability of the Sabbath that gives it its terrifying power. Exceptions are made only for emergencies threatening life or health. Everything else—everything else!—comes to a screeching halt at sundown. The secular understanding of what’s “reasonable” and “normal” gets trumped by a commitment to an alternative vision. A check may be left half written, a shopping trip abandoned with an empty cart, the writing of a paper stopped mid-sentence. This is where the personal gets political: the engines of our social and political systems are fueled by the faith that our daily work and consumer practices (*continued on page 66*)

as they critique the degree to which religious institutions have aided the oppression of ordinary people by the rich and powerful. The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with all its complexities and distortions, has in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries helped to stimulate anti-colonial rebellions and the establishment of new states. Marxism, explicitly anti-religious yet often generating a kind of religious devotion, produced in the democratic socialist societies of Northwest Europe some of the most equitable societies the world has ever seen, yet in Russia and China these movements produced just the kind of oppression and exploitation they were originally dedicated to opposing. Fascistic antirevolutionary movements have created some of the greatest evils in the history of mankind. And even democratic America, although it has realized millennial hopes at least for some, has a list of crimes too long and too horrible to begin to recite.

Prospects for Equality Today

With all the great achievements and the great crimes of modernity, it is hard to say where we stand today. We have the capacity to create a world of peace and justice but also a greater capacity to destroy ourselves than ever before. Among the great ideals of the Enlightenment, supported by many religious as well as secular groups (though always opposed by religious and secular

coalitions), were individual rights, the rule of law, democratic government, and equality. Nowhere in the world are any of these ideals completely institutionalized, though some are more secure than others. Perhaps the most fragile ideal, the one in greatest danger today, is equality.

Marx foresaw the triumph of socialism in the most advanced and prosperous capitalist countries, where the exploited workers would realize they were in a majority. He believed the socialist revolution did not have to be violent but could come about through democratic change, as democratic socialism has done in a number of countries. What Marx did not imagine and would even have necessarily condemned is that socialism would triumph in agrarian settings, such as early twentieth-century Russia and China, where the prosperity and innovation of industrial capitalism were missing. He could have foretold that despotism would be the result.

Today in the United States, the ideal of equality has almost vanished, and those who espouse it—religious or secular—are denounced as “socialist.” Today, when almost all the wealth created by increased productivity goes to the top 1 percent and much of our population (not to mention the inhabitants of the countries where our corporations have moved their factories) lives in poverty, we are very far from realizing the

egalitarianism that capitalism has made possible. Reckless selfishness at the top is also threatening our natural environment. We have reached the point where, by human productivity and ingenuity, a genuinely just and peaceful world is possible, but we can see that the same human capacity can lead to the opposite result. As Terry Eagleton has written:

In the long apocalyptic tradition of cosmic portents, fiery signs in the skies, and impending planetary doom, it was never envisaged that we might prove capable of bringing all this about by ourselves, without the slightest help from a wrathful deity. Who needs an angry God to burn up the planet when as mature, self-sufficient human beings we are perfectly capable of doing the job ourselves?

Moses presented the children of Israel, and through them, the world, with the choice between life and death. Never before have human beings had the capacity to make this choice themselves—the choice between a just and peaceful world and the destruction of our species and our environment. Over 2,000 years ago, the great seers and prophets of the world’s religions foresaw this choice. The hour of decision is surely here. Can the religious traditions that have sprung from those sources influence the choice human beings will make? ■

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are immutable, inevitable, and somehow natural. By injecting doubt into that faith, Sabbath practice disrupts the dominant logic of American culture. Each person who keeps a Sabbath plays a part in exposing the underlying ideology of the status quo—the religion of materialism, self advancement, and the pursuit of individual happiness. For, in Heschel’s words, “a thought has blown the marketplace away.”

As sweet and gentle as the Sabbath may be, its arrival collides violently with the secular world. It forces us to choose every week: will I surrender to a deeper principle of joy and meaning or will I embezzle time from God? It forces us to confront the fundamental question: to what or to whom do I ultimately belong? To my possessions? To my boss? To my insecurities fueled by the media? To my fears about the future? To my boundless thirst for *more*? To whom or to what?

Week in and week out through my

own Sabbath practice, I ask myself this question. And I find that as I am more and more able to answer, “I belong to God” or “to my deepest self” or “to community” or “to the earth” or “to liberation,” I grow in spiritual strength. The tension between the call of work and the call of the Sabbath becomes merely weight added to my spiritual barbells—another opportunity to destabilize my ordinary world and lift up my deepest truths. This is why Sabbath observance is a spiritual practice: it takes discipline, ironically, to enter into an undis-

ciplined, formless time. It takes discipline to reimagine our world. It takes courage to assert and reassert our freedom. It takes a true leap of faith.

It is no coincidence that the Sabbath was invented/received by a people who understood themselves to have once been slaves. The genius of their insight was that sometimes the most politically radical use of time is not to use

it efficiently, but rather to squander it. To spend it lavishly. To while it away—as if the present moment were an eternity, as if the present moment were all that existed, as if we had all the time in the world. This insight became enshrined in Torah, and henceforth the Israelites made perennial commitments to a liberating Power even greater than the Pharaoh. Imagine if we made

commitments to a liberating Power greater than the Pharaohs of our day. Imagine if we reaffirmed those commitments every week with a community dedicated to reclaiming the wealth of time and the promise of justice for ourselves and for all the creatures of the earth. Imagine if we whiled away twenty-five hours a week just lounging together on life's playground. ■

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understood as a series of successive crises. The actual founding of the United States, I argue, lies in its commitment to equality and justice, not simply to independence. Thus, each crisis sought to *re-found* the country, or transform its identity in light of a telos of equality. In each case the Left supplied an indispensable idea, namely a conception of equality that spoke to the country's identity. The reason the Left's contribution was so important was that the meaning of the reforms that resolved each of our three great crises was ambiguous.

Consider the abolition of slavery. The new sense of self-worth experienced by formerly enslaved workers in relation to their free labor could disguise exploitation, as it did in the new factories, or it could become a spur to redeeming the "equality [of] people of subordinate status," as David Brion Davis has argued in *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. The abolitionists, the first American Left, forced the latter meaning, to the extent that it has been forced. Similarly, the powerful mechanisms of the New Deal state could have been used either to help rescue Wall Street or to advance the condition of industrial workers, immigrants and southern blacks. To the extent that the New Deal did the latter, it was due to the efforts of the socialists, understood broadly to include a great range of American reform, including the communists. Finally, the Sixties could have produced a meritocratic, consumption-oriented, two-tier rentier society or a worldwide democratic

transformation centered on an expanded ideal of equality. The New Left sought to establish the second outcome; if it failed, the long-term meaning of the episode remains to be seen. What the Left did, then, was to give an *egalitarian meaning* to each of our epochal transformations—to articulate racial equality as the meaning of the Civil War, social equality as the meaning of the New Deal, and participatory democracy as the meaning of the Sixties.

In doing so, the Left sought to place the ideal of equality at the center of the country's collective memory. In recent years we have been reminded of how important collective memory is by the Tea Party movement, which insists on the founding fathers' sacred writ. The Left, by contrast, argues that the nation's identity is an ongoing project, constantly being redefined, but in the direction of greater equality: what Richard Rorty called "achieving our country." Thus a crucial moment for the first American Left occurred when Lincoln insisted that the Declaration of Independence's proclamation of the equality of "all men" was not placed there to effect the separation from Great Britain but rather "for future use," by which Lincoln meant the emancipation of the slaves.

Likewise, Eleanor Roosevelt understood the nation's identity as an ongoing project when she arranged for Marian Anderson, denied access to the Daughters of the American Revolution Hall, to sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The Lincoln Memorial, she grasped, had been put there for "future

use." In his speech to the 1963 "March for Jobs and Freedom," Martin Luther King observed that "all men—yes, black men as well as white men" had been given a "promissory note" in the form of the Declaration of Independence, and that the note had come due. In each case, the Left connected the present to a telos of equality, seeking to refound the country on an egalitarian basis. Far from being irrelevant, then, the Left has been central to the country's effort to establish a coherent history based on its deepest resources. What my recent book, *Why America Needs a Left*, does is work this out for the three cases.

The Abolition of Slavery

The abolitionists were the first American Left. Born with the two-party system, they were responsible for such innovations as ongoing systematic agitation, demonstration, leafleting, nonviolent direct action, and the presence of women and blacks in public life. As American historians all know, many early nineteenth-century Americans wanted to abolish slavery, but most were content to return slaves to Africa or to limit the area in which slavery could be practiced, thus encouraging its long-term decline.

By contrast, the abolitionists—many of whom were "free Negroes"—linked the end of slavery to integrating schools and churches and accepting interracial marriages. Without the abolitionists, slavery would have been abolished, but then we wouldn't have had the attempt—however flawed—to refound the country on the basis of racial equality. The original impetus for the Left, it is worth