



InterfaithFamily.com

Encouraging Jewish Choices & A Welcoming Jewish Community

GUIDE TO SHABBAT FOR INTERFAITH FAMILIES

Table of Contents

What is Shabbat?	2
What's It All About?.....	3
Variations on Making Shabbat	4
How You Can Make Shabbat.....	6
Prepare	6
Light Candles	7
Make Blessings On Food and Drink	8
Saturday Lunch.....	11
Other Shabbat Activities	11
Shabbat in the Synagogue.....	12
Tot Shabbat	12
Services	12
Additional Resources	14

What is Shabbat?

Shabbat is the Jewish Sabbath--though the English word actually came from Shabbat. It's a day of rest and enjoyment at the end of every week that religious people undertake in imitation of God, who rested on the seventh day of creation. Traditional Jews refrain from all work on Shabbat, reserving it instead for prayer, study, visiting friends and family, large meals, pleasant walks and naps. It's pronounced Shah-baht, though some spell it Shabbos and pronounce it shah-biss. Shabbat lasts from just before sundown on Friday until an hour after sundown on Saturday evening. The greetings for Shabbat are "Shabbat Shalom," or in Yiddish, "Gut Shabbos." (It sounds like "good Shabbos" and that's what it means.)

What's It All About?

In Jewish culture, Shabbat is a day of peace, rest, reflection, hospitality and family. In North American Jewish families, Shabbat dinner on Friday evening can be important family time. In Israel, secular Jewish families get together on Saturday to eat and just be together. The Jewish cultural values of hospitality and family find their expression in the customs of Shabbat.

In Judaism as a religion, Shabbat is deeply meaningful, with both universal messages and particularistic Jewish ones. Shabbat is explicitly an imitation of God. Just as God rested in the creation narrative in the biblical book of Genesis, human beings rest. Genesis 2:1-3 is part of the Shabbat kiddush, the blessing over the wine which sanctifies the holiday. The verses in the Torah that explain Shabbat say that non-Jewish people who live with Jews are also to rest--everyone can take part in the appreciation of creation that resting enables.

The particularistic theology of Shabbat is that it is a symbol of God's covenant with the Jewish people. Shabbat features in the Ten Commandments, and the commandment to keep Shabbat is repeated in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew scripture that provides the foundation for Judaism. In Judaism, Shabbat is both a universal experience for everyone who shares in the delight of creation, and a special experience for the Jewish people.

Variations on Making Shabbat

People talk about keeping Shabbat, observing Shabbat or making Shabbat. By keeping or observing, they mean following basic principles in Jewish law about not working Shabbat. By making Shabbat, they mean doing the preparatory work of cooking and readying the household, saying the blessings and creating a special atmosphere. What making Shabbat looks like varies from household to household, in part because there isn't agreement on what observing Shabbat should mean.

In trying to figure out what it means to refrain from work on Shabbat, the rabbis of the Talmud, the foundational code of Jewish law, drew on the scriptural verses of Exodus 31, which discusses both the importance of refraining from labor on Shabbat, and the construction of the Tabernacle, the portable temple that the Israelites used in the desert to perform sacrificial worship. The rabbis deduced the nature of the labor one should not do on Shabbat from the list of activities described in the section on building the Tabernacle. They made a list of 39 categories of work that should not be performed on Shabbat.

Succeeding generations have had to decide whether new activities that didn't exist in the time of the Tabernacle fit into these 39 categories. That is why, for example, some Jews won't use their cars on Shabbat--because the internal combustion engine is like lighting a fire, which was a prohibited action. Some won't turn on the lights, because the act of flipping a switch builds a circuit, and building is another category of work. Some Jews who agree that it's a positive thing not to work on Shabbat disagree about what constitutes work.

Adherence to these categories can have a positive impact on the lives of people who follow them as a guide. If you can't cook and can't drive and can't write, you really have to rest. There are a lot of people in Western society who consider themselves lazy, but nevertheless find they have a hard time taking this strict approach to resting on Shabbat. For many of the people who follow them, the restrictions are both challenging and liberating.

The downside of these strict rules is that, since some of them are difficult to keep, many people decide the whole practice of Shabbat is too difficult. Furthermore, the particulars of Shabbat observance have become a sort of litmus test separating different groups of Jews. The happy, peaceful day of rest is a huge source of contention. This is not a new problem; we've been arguing about how to do Shabbat for centuries.

Here are some historical examples of the arguments Jews have had over how to do Shabbat:

- In late antiquity, a group of Jews called the Karaites disagreed with the rabbis who wrote the Talmud about whether it was following Shabbat prohibitions to keep food warm in an oven. This eventually led to an irrevocable rupture between the two groups. The Karaites' descendants don't consider themselves part of today's Jewish people--all over hot food.
- In early 19th century Germany, the Reform movement decided to incorporate musical instruments in Shabbat services in order to lure music-loving German Jews to synagogue. Orthodox Jews objected to the violation of their interpretation of Jewish law. It was one of several items of ritual practice that divided the two groups.
- In the early 20th century, some Reform Jews tried to move the main service of the week to Sunday, because it was difficult for some Jews to get Saturdays off of work.
- In 1960, Conservative movement rabbis ruled that it was permissible for Jews to drive on Shabbat, but only to synagogue. Orthodox Jews disagreed.

You wouldn't think it was possible to rest and relax wrong.

Despite all this disagreement over the particulars, it isn't. Shabbat isn't something you can do wrong. If you're doing it at all, you're doing it right.

You can bring holiness and peace into your life in 20 minutes of blessings before Friday night dinner. Shabbat is for the entire Jewish community, and unlike many other Jewish observances, Shabbat explicitly includes the non-Jewish members of our families. Everyone can have Shabbat, not only those who are willing to abide by the greatest stringencies. If you want it, you can have it--this Friday night!

How You Can Make Shabbat

Prepare

In the Jewish calendar, days begin at sundown, rather than at sunrise or at midnight. The most important thing you can do to make Shabbat special is to remember that it's coming and plan to have a nice meal with your friends or family on Friday evening. If you aren't ready for any other piece of Shabbat observance, this is a good first step. It's an important Jewish custom to save your best food for Shabbat. A tasty Friday night dinner, even one that isn't traditional Jewish food, even something ordered from the pizza joint down the street, will make it feel like Shabbat. Especially if you eat it in your house with people you love.

One activity that can be special in the week before Shabbat is baking hallah, the braided bread Eastern European Jews eat on Shabbat and holidays. Though one could use any whole loaves of bread for Shabbat, making the special braided loaves of hallah is an opportunity for creativity. It's easier to find the time to bake when you aren't a parent, but a lot of fun if you have children to make crazy shapes with the dough.

Light Candles

The beginning of Shabbat is marked with the lighting of candles. In biblical times, women lit a lamp that had to last them through the evening, since lighting a fire was work they would not do during Shabbat. This tradition has been carried forward through Jewish history. Today, you can begin your Shabbat on Friday evening by lighting the candles and saying a blessing.

You can buy candles that are marked "Shabbat candles" in many supermarkets, though if you can't find them, other plain candles will work. Since we let them burn down and don't usually move them or blow them out, make sure you find a good fire-safe spot. One lights the candles first because saying the blessing is what brings in Shabbat.

This is probably the origin of the custom of covering the eyes before saying the blessing--to hide that the action in the blessing already happened. Some have the additional custom of waving the hands toward the face, as though to bring in the light of the candles.

The blessing is:

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam asher kideshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzeevanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.

Blessed are You Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us by your commandments and commanded us to light the Shabbat candles.

After the candles have been blessed, don't blow them out.

Make Blessings On Food and Drink

Before both the Friday evening meal and lunchtime on Saturday, there is an opportunity to affirm the holiness of Shabbat through the Kiddush. This blessing over wine combines the regular acknowledgment of God's role in feeding people with a longer blessing on remembering creation. If you don't feel comfortable saying the blessing in Hebrew, you can recite an English translation of all or part of it.

Many Jews grow up drinking a very sweet sacramental wine for Kiddush. Some people like this wine, either because they like sweet things or because it makes them nostalgic. Sweet wine isn't necessary, however. Kosher wine makers, who make wine according to Jewish law about food and drink, are doing their best to improve the quality and variety of kosher wines, so that people who only make Kiddush on kosher wine can choose a dry wine if they like. The same blessing that is used for wine can also be made over unfermented grape juice. Really the point is to sanctify a symbol of joy and relaxation, and you only have to drink the sweet stuff if you like it.

The Friday evening Kiddush has three parts: a reading of Genesis 1:31-2:3, a short blessing over the wine itself and a longer sanctification of Shabbat. Here is the translation of the entire blessing, with a transliteration of the short blessing over the wine itself:

And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day. The heavens and the earth, and all they contain, were completed. By the seventh day, God had finished the work which God had been doing, and rested from all work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, for on it God rested from all the works of creation.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, borei pe-ri ha-gafen.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who has made us holy with your commandments. Lovingly you have favored us with the gift of your holy Shabbat as our inheritance, a reminder of creation, first among the sacred days, recalling our liberation from Egypt. You have chosen us and given us a holy purpose from among all the peoples. In loving favor, you have given us your holy Shabbat as a heritage. Blessed are you, God, who makes Shabbat holy.

After the Kiddush, the next blessing is over the bread. It's often called [Ha-Motzi](#), which means "who brings forth" because it's a blessing on God bringing forth bread from the earth.

Some perform a ritual hand-washing before the blessing over bread. (Of course you should really wash with soap and water before you eat--what would your mother say? Not to mention your kindergarten teacher. This is symbolic washing, to remind you.)

For the ritual washing the blessing is:

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, asher kideshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzeevanu al nitilat yadaim.

Blessed are You Lord Our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us by your commandments and commanded us concerning the waving of hands.

(I don't know why the Hebrew verb is to wave--probably because people wave their hands around to dry them after they've washed.)

Some do this ritual washing with a cup. They fill the cup with water and pour the water over the hands, then wave the hands and dry them on a towel while reciting the blessing. Some progress to the table without doing anything else that isn't part of progressing toward eating bread. (If everyone suddenly stops talking and starts humming, that's why.)

For the bread, the blessing is:

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, ha-motzi lekhem min ha-aretz

Blessed are You, Lord Our God, Ruler of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.

There are a lot of small customs associated with performing this blessing. First you take your cover off the loaves of bread. For some reason, rabbis give as the reason for the hallah cover that the hallah will be embarrassed because you blessed the wine first! Some lift the loaves together, others make a symbolic slice at the bread with a knife, perhaps to remind us of animal sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem in ancient times.

After you've made the blessing you can slice or tear the bread into pieces, salt it and distribute it. Because we put bread into the hands of a mourner and Shabbat is a day of celebration, some families have the tradition of putting the bread on a plate or in a basket to pass it. There's also a Sephardic custom of throwing the bread. Another, newer custom is for everyone to say the blessing together while touching the bread, and pull off a piece at the same time.

The blessing on the bread covers all the foods you eat in your delicious meal. The blessings before eating are short. People who want a long grace have to wait until the grace *after* meals, which is longer.

You can acquire a siddur, or prayerbook, that contains all of these blessings in Hebrew and additional traditional songs to sing at the Shabbat table. You can also get a bencher, which is the Yiddish word for the short booklet containing the grace after meals with Shabbat blessings and songs printed to distribute at weddings and bar and bat mitzvah coming of age ceremonies.

Saturday Lunch

You can recite the daytime Kiddush and the blessing over bread at Saturday lunch and have a special meal on Saturday as well as on Friday evening. Traditional observance mandates three meals on Shabbat: Friday night dinner, Saturday lunch and Saturday supper, sometimes called Seudah Shelishit.

For reasons that aren't entirely clear, Saturday lunch feels like a greater commitment to Jewish observance than Friday night dinner for many people. You can try this and any other Shabbat custom without immediately making a commitment to always observe them. These pleasures are yours to enjoy. You don't have to change yourself into some idealized religious person to claim your share of Shabbat relaxation and spirituality.

Other Shabbat Activities

If you are exploring Shabbat as a spiritual practice, you could choose to use it as your day for a long walk, a long yoga practice or a long nap. It could be your day to see friends in person instead of sending an email. It's a good day to read a book if that's something you like to do but never seem to have the time. Without any rituals at all, Shabbat can still be a good day just to be.

Shabbat in the Synagogue

Tot Shabbat

Many InterfaithFamily.com readers report how much they enjoy structured activities for children on Shabbat. Synagogues often offer monthly Friday evening or Saturday morning intergenerational services, featuring storytelling and music for young children. It's fun in and of itself, your family can learn more about Shabbat from it and it's a good way to learn more about whether a Jewish community feels welcoming--not only to interfaith families, but to your specific family.

InterfaithFamily.com's Connections in Your Area has more information about Tot Shabbat services near you. Go to <http://sn.im/totshabbat> for more information.

Services

Jewish services are usually longer than most Christian services. Though the traditional liturgy for Friday night is usually brief, the Saturday morning service can stretch out to fill a day when people aren't going to work. Here's the schedule of traditional services:

Kabbalat Shabbat: On Friday evening, late medieval Jewish mystics in the northern Israel town of Safed used to go into the fields in white clothing to welcome Shabbat Ha-Malkah, the Sabbath Queen, a personification of Shabbat. They called this Kabbalat Shabbat, reception of Shabbat. Ordinary Jews have taken on their custom of singing a series of psalms and hymns on Friday evenings. This is usually a short service with a lot of singing--about an hour. Some congregations offer an Oneg Shabbat (Enjoyment of Shabbat)--an elaborate snack with a social atmosphere--after the service.

Shabbat morning services: There's a lot of traditional liturgy to cover in a Shabbat morning service, including a long Torah reading. You may find that in some Reform and some Orthodox congregations, the service is a little shorter--in the Reform movement, because the service has been judiciously edited to include fewer prayers in Hebrew and in some Orthodox congregations, because the people pray at breakneck speed. Generally, though, it's going to be long and there's going to be at least some prayer and singing in Hebrew.

Relax and don't worry about sticking out. If you have trouble following, ask someone to be your

buddy and help you track the pages, though in most congregations the service leader will announce them. People like to be experts and they will help you.

There should be a dvar torah or sermon related to the Torah portion of the week. In some congregations there is a Torah discussion.

At the end of the service, in many congregations, there is a substantial snack served with Kiddush. The service leader usually chants the Saturday morning Kiddush before the food is served.

Minchah In some congregations, there is a Saturday afternoon service that is shorter than the Saturday morning service. It features a shorter Torah reading of the portion for the coming Shabbat.

Havdalah: A beautiful ceremony marks the end of Shabbat--Havdalah, or differentiation. It's a lovely way to greet the new week. You can say Havdalah as part of the evening service after Shabbat in synagogue, or recite the blessings over the multi-flame candle, the spices and the wine at home. It's nice to look into the eyes of the people in your family and see the candle flame reflected in them.

Additional Resources

Falk, Marcia. *The Book of Blessings*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.
A completely untraditional, innovative rereading of Jewish liturgy, emphasizing the immanence of God in nature.

Gimbel, Jeremy. *Birkon Mikdash Me'at: NFTY's Bencher*. New York: URJ Press, 2005.
The Reform youth movement booklet with the grace after meals, blessings and Hebrew songs popular in the Reform movement.

Haruni, Mike and Munishor, Phillip. *The Nevarech Bencher*. Jerusalem: Israel Observer Publications, 1999.
A booklet with the grace after meals, blessings and Hebrew songs, featuring color photographs as illustrations and clear, easy to read translation.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975. You can read an excerpt, Shabbat as a Sanctuary in Time, at MyJewishLearning.com, here:
<http://sn.im/heschelonshabbat>
This is a classic work of Jewish theology.

Olivestone, David. *The NCSY Benscher*. New York: Artscroll Publications, 1993.
This is the Orthodox youth movement booklet with the grace after meals, blessings and Hebrew songs, featuring a very complete transliteration.

Shabbat on Ritualwell.org. <http://www.ritualwell.org/shabbat/shabbatlif/>
Articles about personal practice from a feminist spiritual perspective.

Wolfson, Ron. *The Shabbat Seder*. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002.
Everything you need to know to observe Shabbat. This book has an accompanying booklet with prayers for use at your table.