

Shabbos In Isolation

Daniel Greenberg's Article in the Magen Avot Shabbat UK Reflections on Shabbat Booklet March 2019

Shabbat Shalom and I hope you are very much enjoying Shabbat UK 2019.

I am sending you these greetings from Colombo in Sri Lanka where I am training public officials in legislative drafting. Over the last few years I have on quite a few occasions found myself somewhere far-flung engaged in rule-of-law work, often in places more isolated than Sri Lanka. Normally there is no community at all, including Chabad, and Shabbos means 25 hours alone in my hotel room. This has made me think a lot about what Shabbos does and should mean for me.

For me, as for many others, my normal Shabbos experience centres around meals with my family and friends, and praying with my community. And I miss both very much when I am away. But enforced isolation has reminded me that these are enhancements of my Shabbos experience and my spiritual life generally; but they cannot be the essence of either.

There are many people who regularly spend Shabbos without either family or community around them, for an enormously wide range of reasons: a religion that denied them a completely satisfying Shabbos experience would be inherently discriminatory, which I happen not to believe that God is.

So I think it's very important when we celebrate Shabbos that we separate out the cultural features that we have come to associate with it, from the religious essence of the day itself. One or two of the Shabbosos that I have spent alone in foreign countries have been among the most spiritually powerful Shabbosos of my life, precisely because they have been isolated. I remember a Shabbos in Malaysia where I was able to concentrate on the fact that the Yomim Noro'im were approaching, with an intensity that is often diluted by family and community social opportunities. I remember another Shabbos, which I think was also a Shabbat UK, when I sat on the balcony of my hotel room in the Solomon Islands looking at the depth of blue of the sea and discovered a new meaning for me in the midrashic explanation about the link between the blue colour of tcheiles for tzitsis and our perception of Heaven.

Not all my isolated Shabbosos have been so successful: sometimes, I have simply wanted to get home again and have been unable to focus on the spirituality of the day at all. But, of course, the same is true of all Shabbosos: sometimes being

surrounded by family and community massively enhances the spirituality of Shabbos; but sometimes family or community events detract from it.

So my message to all my friends in the Magen Avot community today is that while enjoying the community cohesion of Shabbat UK, perhaps we can also take it as a useful opportunity to remember all those who, whether occasionally or regularly, do not find themselves surrounded on Shabbos by family, friends and community. Perhaps we can make an extra effort to include those people in family and community events to the extent that they want to be included; but perhaps we can also take inspiration from them, and remember that within our Shabbos experience we have to ensure that family, community and social interaction do not displace or dilute the essence of Shabbos itself, and that we remember to make time for developing our own personal relationships with God and for reflection on the peace and holiness of the Shabbos day itself.

Good Shabbos to everybody and looking forward to seeing you again soon.

Daniel Greenberg