

Shabat Day, When to Pray, When to Eat

by Ariel Bar Tzadok

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It is written in the Talmud (Shabat 117a), that it is appropriate and good to have a special third Shabat meal on Shabat afternoons. The significance of this ritual, however, has been lost because of the cultural changes that have developed over centuries.

In Talmudic times, when this tradition was instituted, the common practice was to eat only two meals a day, one in the morning to start the day, and the second in the evening, to end the day. There was no concept, or practice, of that which today we call lunch.

The first Shabat meal would then be eaten Friday night, the second Shabat meal would then be eaten Saturday morning. The next meal would not be until Saturday night, after the Shabat had ended. The Sages then instituted that there be a special Shabat meal, a third Shabat meal to be eaten Saturday afternoons. This meal is called in Hebrew Seudat Shlishit.

Seudat Shlishit became the main meal of the Shabat day, a full course dinner-like meal, eaten after the afternoon prayers, towards the early half of mid-afternoon. On Shabat, the time for afternoon prayers is what is called Minha Gedolah, which begins from the sixth and a half hour (seasonal time) from sunrise. Following this Minha (afternoon) prayer (at about 12:30 p.m. or so in the afternoon), the third Shabat meal, the Seudat Shlishit was eaten.

At the time of its inception, this was a cultural revolution because no one sat down for a meal in the middle of the day like this. But when it comes to honoring the Shabat, our Sages have ordained that nothing is to be left undone.

In modern times, the significance of Seudat Shlishit has fallen to the wayside because of the late time of morning prayers and the even later time of what was once the Shabat morning meal, rightfully called Seudat Shaharit in the Shulkhan Arukh (Code of Torah Law, O.H. 289).

According to both the Talmud and the Shulkhan Arukh, the proper time for morning prayers has always been with the rising of the sun. This means that prayer time begins much earlier than this, and that the Amidah (Shemoneh Esrei) of the Shaharit morning service is begun just as the rays of sunshine breaks forth upon the horizon. Following the Amidah, the Torah is read, followed by the Musaf prayers. The entire morning service is then concluded at its proper early hour.

It is at this time then that one would return to his home, recite the morning Kiddush, and proceed to enjoy his normal morning meal, at a normal morning hour. However, in modern times, when prayers are recited much later in the morning, totally out of sync with nature, the following morning meal has come to be eaten at lunchtime. The second Shabat meal thus has ceased to be a Seudat Shaharit, like the Shulkhan Arukh calls it.

Essentially the second Shabat meal has supplanted the third Shabat meal, and taken its place. As such, the Seudat Shlishit has lost its significance and specialty. Indeed, today, because most eat such a large second Shabat meal, most observe the Seudat Shlishit only in the most minor of ways. In my opinion, this insults the spirit of the Sages and contradicts what it was that they were trying to teach.

The Seudat Shlishit was supposed to be special. It cannot maintain its specialty all the while that it has been supplanted by the second Shabat meal. Seudat Shlishit cannot reclaim its rightful place until the second Shabat meal is first returned to its right and proper place as a breakfast (Seudat Shaharit) after morning prayers. Yet, this cannot happen all the while that people delay their morning prayers and recite them all morning long, instead of in their proper time, with the rising of the sun.

As long as morning prayers are recited at a later hour, one remains out of sync with the natural order of prayer, worship and Divine bonding. This later prayer time has today become the norm with the spiritually disconnected, and there is no shortage of Rabbis who will come to defend the later hour of Shabat prayers.

Granted, while the letter of Torah Law does tolerate later prayers, still, we must never confuse issues. Just because it may be permissible to pray at a later hour does not mean that it is right and best to do so. Anyone claiming that beginning prayers anytime after sunrise is a preferable course of action is only revealing just how out of sync with nature and with Elohim, nature's God, such a one really is. While technically right, such a one is fundamentally wrong!

In my opinion, the way for one to properly observe the Shabat, and to rightly honor the words of our Sages, one must begin by returning to the original tradition of reciting one's morning prayers (Shaharit) with the rising of the sun. In this way, one will finish one's prayers in time to then eat the second Shabat meal in the morning, as breakfast, as was the original tradition.

One can then pray the afternoon prayers in their proper time (Minha Gedolah, six and a half hours after sunrise), and then eat the major meal of the day at about 1 or 2 in the afternoon. The major afternoon meal is thus the Seudat Shlishit and it thus fulfills its proper and intended function, as the Talmudic Sages ordained for it in the first place.

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This, to me, is the right and proper practice, and it is the one that is observed in my home. Granted, our practice is very different from the practice as presently observed in most Torah observant communities. Yet, I believe that the practice as observed in the other communities is built upon faulty foundations. I believe their practice disregards the intentions of our Sages. I, for one, will not contribute to, what to me, is a spirit of disrespect.

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Sleeping late on the Shabat wastes precious time that should be focused on other, more important spiritual endeavors. Not praying and not eating at proper times only reinforces a disconnection from nature, and from Elohim, nature's God.

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All Torah faithful souls are very familiar with the proclamation in Deut 4:39, that YHWH, He is Elohim, in the Heavens above and on the Earth beneath, there is no other. Therefore, to be faithful to our God YHWH, we must also be faithful to nature, and thus to Elohim, nature's God. This cannot be limited to a conceptual understanding. This has to be practiced in deed and actions.

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I believe that a change in practice, regarding the times of prayer and meals on the Shabat day, is called for. I can see nothing but significant benefits to come forth from such a change, as I outlined above.

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I would pray that those who read these words might take them to heart, and return to the proper Torah way, to set out on a different path from those who stubbornly embrace the unnatural, and who refuse to honor the Sages and their age-old natural wisdom.

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