

JONATHAN ROMAIN

Let Starmer turn his phone off for Friday night dinner

Jonathan Romain

Saturday July 20 2024, 12.01am, The Times



Religion unexpectedly leapt to the forefront of the last few days of

campaigning for the general election when Sir Keir Starmer was attacked for observing part of the Jewish Sabbath.

In a radio interview, he said how he tries to ring-fence Friday evenings for his family, so that he can have the traditional Sabbath eve dinner with his Jewish wife and children. This unleashed criticism that he would not respond to emergency events after 6pm on Fridays and that he would be a “part-time prime minister”.

Quite apart from the fact that it is very healthy for every person to have a good balance between work and family time, it ignored the powerful pull of the Jewish Sabbath that defies the millennia.

When it was first introduced — notably the only ritual mentioned in the Ten Commandments — it was a revolutionary idea. Instead of working sunrise to sunset seven days a week, throughout the year, a time of rest was institutionalised. Moreover, it was irrespective of one's worth, status or gender, but for everyone in society, including “your manservant, your maidservant ... and the stranger who lives in your home” (Exodus xx, 10). Non-stop work came to an abrupt halt.

ADVERTISEMENT

As a social enactment, it was astonishingly forward-thinking. It may have been associated with appreciation of God's handiwork and how God rested on the seventh day, but its effect was to benefit humans and to allow physical and mental reinvigoration.

It was also a means of taking control of time and breaking it up into manageable units, rather than being rushed along like a paddleless kayak in a fierce running stream.

Whether it was the Jewish Saturday, Christian Sunday or Muslim Friday, it became, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, “a sanctuary which we build in time” and allow ourselves not only to worship but to breathe afresh.

In Jewish tradition, this came to mean a ban on all forms of work, be it one's job, or housework, or any tasks that took away from a sense of rest. In its place was a mix of prayer, reading, walking, a more leisurely meal, family, friends and community.

Of course, not all Jews observe the Sabbath, either in every detail, or for its full length, but many keep the family gathering together at the start of the Sabbath on a Friday evening.

ADVERTISEMENT

I suspect the Starmer household is similar to that of my family as I grew up: my parents were not particularly religious, nor regular synagogue-goers. Most nights either I or one of them or one of my brothers was out, but Friday night we all stayed in.

There was a religious element in that we lit two candles to welcome in the Sabbath eve and said the blessings over the challah bread and glass of wine that is traditional; but that was the full extent of the rituals, taking four minutes in all.

The rest of the time was the meal and talking, listening, sometimes arguing, but being together. This was the truly distinctive part: disengaging ourselves from all our other interests and obligations, concentrating on each other. A time to regroup as a family or renew ourselves individually.

On a communal level, this is a key Jewish observance and although it is not done in the synagogue, everyone knows that most others are doing it in their own homes and there is a transcendent bonding.

As the 19th-century Hebrew poet, Ahad Ha'am, put it: "More than the people of Israel have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the people of Israel." Despite our lapses, it succeeds in keeping us rooted Jewishly.

On an individual level it is a form of self-healing, for there is a big difference between "not working" and "rest": the former is time off one's daily activities, but one can still be busy or feel pressurised with other issues, whereas "rest" means letting go of all those weights, making time for more nurturing pastimes and replenishing one's personal reserves.

Rest does not come by itself. If you wait for free time, it never arrives. You have to create it by setting aside a designated period, free it from other constraints and ensure you protect it from incursions.

Friday nights are not the whole Sabbath, but for many a household, it provides the haven that prime ministers and maidservants alike all need.

Dr Jonathan Romain is minister of Maidenhead Synagogue and author of Confessions of a Rabbi (Biteback Publishing)