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## NINETEENTH-CENTURY SABBATH OBSERVANCE

**Dr. Yitzchok Levine**  
Posted Jun 01 2011

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(All quotes are from "The Trend in Jewish Religious Observance in Mid-Nineteenth Century America" by Jeremiah J. Berman, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961)* available online at [www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm](http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm).)



The previous two columns discussed kashrus and *bris milah* observance in America during the 19th century. The trend was that until about 1860 most Jews were careful to observe these *mitzvos*. However, in the latter part of the century many Jews abandoned keeping kosher both at home and in public. *Bris milah*, though, was generally observed throughout the entire century.

*Shmiras Shabbos* followed a pattern similar to kashrus observance.

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The Jews of the early part of the century honored the Sabbath. While individual Jews may have been lax in their observance of the day of rest, Jews in the main were observant. At least the contemporary Anglo-Jewish journals mirror no marked Sabbath violation. Many Jews then were peddlers or small businessmen and free to abstain from labor as they chose.

This was particularly true in many small towns. Beginning with 1860, however, we read general and ever increasing complaints of Sabbath desecration. The change is aptly summarized in this report of 1882 from Cleveland:

Sabbath observance is at a low ebb, and as a result the synagogues are poorly attended. Twenty-five years ago it was the exception to break the Sabbath and dietary laws, and it was a pleasure to see the crowded "schule," and share in the happy social influences. That time has passed. There is no difference between the orthodox and the reformers in this respect.

Similar accounts emanated from Albany, Hartford, and other places.

During the 1860s there were concerted efforts on the part of a number of rabbis to have Jewish merchants close their businesses on Shabbos. An effort to strengthen *shmiras Shabbos* in San Francisco in 1865 was temporarily successful.

Interestingly, it was not just Orthodox rabbis who urged their congregants to keep Shabbos. Some of the cooperating merchants in San Francisco were members of Dr. Elkan Cohn's Reform congregation.

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**Interior of the Lloyd Street Synagogue,  
Baltimore, MD dedicated in 1845**

Dr. Isaac M. Weiss of Cincinnati, a leader of the Reform movement during the 19th century, encouraged his followers to observe the Sabbath. David Einhorn, who in 1855 became the spiritual leader of the Reform Congregation Har Sinai in Baltimore, also urged his congregants to keep Shabbos.

Still, efforts to promote *shmiras Shabbos* often were not very successful.

A bright spot in the general drab picture of Sabbath violation was Cincinnati in 1876. There, "a walk down Pearl Street on Saturday revealed the fact that almost every store owned by a co-religionist was closed."

But this was by no means the norm. The trend in the 1850s and 1860s was toward more and more *chillul Shabbos*.

The 1860s saw Jewish butchers who were open on Saturdays.

H. Beermann, a meat dealer doing business at 466½-8th Avenue, New York City, in 1865 felt called upon in his advertising to state that he was closed on Sabbath. Henry Schloss, another meat dealer, located at 466-8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, made similar statements in his advertising four years later. Even *shochtim* in Philadelphia in 1867 were known to be Sabbath transgressors. They were responsible for this warning, issued by the Rev. Isaac Leiser, as secretary of the Philadelphia Board of Jewish Ministers, on Oct. 29, 1867:

To the Israelites of Philadelphia: It being against our laws to allow anyone to kill cattle or poultry for the use of Israelites who violate the Sabbath, the public are respectfully cautioned against buying meat or poultry killed by anyone who so offends.

It was not long before *chillul Shabbos* became public. Jewish organizations and societies began conducting balls on Friday evenings.

The Sabbath eve of March 19, 1870, saw two balls in New York City - one under the auspices of the Noah Benevolent Society, and the other conducted by the Grand Lodge of the Free Men of Israel. The B'nai B'rith of New Haven scheduled its ball in 1871 for Friday evening, January 20. Benefit concerts on Sabbath evenings presented a similar dour spectacle. In 1882, one was conducted at the Highland House in Cincinnati for the benefit of the Russian refugees. In 1884, one was held at Phoenix Hall, Detroit, under the auspices of the Hebrew Ladies Aid Society on Friday evening, February 29.

*Shmiras Shabbos* often meant a real loss in business income. Add to this the fact that in many places one was not allowed to open one's business on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath, and it is easy to understand the strong temptation to keep businesses open on Shabbos.

It got to the point where some Reform temples switched worship from Saturday to Sunday, though this change was never widely adopted because most Jews felt that it was both too radical and "un-Jewish." Nonetheless, America by the latter part of the 19th century was well on its way to becoming a *treife medina*. It would not be until the middle of the 20th century that Orthodoxy, despite the dire predictions of its demise in America, would begin to develop into the vibrant force it is today.

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**NON KOSHER AND KOSHER**

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UNDERSTANDING WHAT KOSHER IS APPRECIATING WHAT GOD MADE THEN  
PHYSICALLY BLESSING THE FOOD WITH CARE.  
KOSHER IS HEAVEN FOOD, GOING BACK TO EATING NON KOSHER FOOD IS IS  
WORTHLESS TO ME DOES NOT HAVE THE SAME VALUE.  
KNOWING THE DIFFERENT RESPECTING THE CHOICE AND STICKING  
TO IT. TAKING IT SERIOUSLY AND SELECT K OR KOSHER OR PARVE  
OR U ON THE PACKAGE. THEN WHEN YOU DECIDE TO BUY NON KOSHER ITS  
HOLLOW FOOD. KOSHER IS STARTING TO BE POPULAR AND MORE CONVENIENTLY  
AVAILABLE. MORE PRODUCTS OUT THEIR SO YOU DONT HAVE TO SACRIFICE  
CHOICES. I GO OUT OF MY WAY TO BUY KOSHER FOOD. THE FEELING WILL BE  
WHEN YOU DONT BUY KOSHER ITS LIKE YOU STOPPED PRAYING.

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