

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Sabbath Observance During the Nineteenth Century

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*Note: Unless otherwise indicated, 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)*; 1947; 37, AJHS Journal, pg. 31 ff. The article is available online at no cost at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>*

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

In this article we shall discuss nineteenth century Sabbath observance (*Shmiras Shabbos*) in America. We shall see that this followed a pattern similar to kashrus observance.

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. The following notice appeared in the San Francisco *Hebrew* on October 4:

We, the undersigned, merchants of the city of San Francisco, give notice that from and after this date, we will keep our places of business closed on Saturdays:

L. & M. Sachs & Co.	M. Morgenthau
M. Heller & Bros.	W. & I. Steinhardt
Levi Strauss & Co.	M. Cohn & Co.
H. Cohn & Co.	Kline & Co.
Scholle Bros.	Hecht Bros.
Rosenstock & Price	Triest & Friedlander
J. Seligman & Co. Toklas,	Wise & Co.
Uhlfelder & Cahn	Fechheimer, Goodkind & Co.
Wm. Meyer & CO.	J. Baum & Bro.
Simon Dinkelspiel & Co.	P. Berwin & Bros.
Einstein Bros.	A. Jacobs & Co.

Under date of October 11th, the following also resolved to close on the Sabbath:

M. Hornberger & Co.	Ackerman & Co.
Wellhoff Bros.	E. Goldsmith
L. Alexander	J. Speier & Bro.
M. Wolff	S. Jacobs
M. Weiss	

Interestingly enough, it was not just Orthodox rabbis who urged their congregants to keep Shabbos. Some of the co-operating merchants listed above were members of Dr. Elkan Cohn's reform congregation.

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

The famed traveler Benjamin II (I. J. Benjamin) relates that when he visited Baltimore in 1859, he found that Einhorn had induced the members of his congregation "to keep their places of business closed on the Sabbath." This is no doubt an exaggeration, but it would seem that at least some members of Har Sinai followed their rabbi's suggestion.¹

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."

However, this was by no means the norm. The trend in the 1850s and 1860s was toward more and more *Chillul Shabbos*.

In 1850, to cite only one example, no one who violated the Sabbath could serve on the board of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. The congregation was still Orthodox in 1857, yet in that year it was decided that one “who keeps [his business open] on the Sabbath” could not serve as president or vice president. Nothing was said about any other office.²

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

H. Beermann, a meat dealer doing business at 466 ½ -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 466-8th 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. This took place gradually.

At first, and with considerable timidity, they opened their establishments, but had their [non-Jewish] employees attend to customers. Thus in 1859 we find Hartford Jewish stores doing business on Saturdays, but the proprietors sanctimoniously attending worship Friday evening, Saturday morning, and Saturday afternoon. In time, Jewish storekeepers came in Saturday afternoons, but after having spent a

morning at the synagogue, probably followed by a good dinner at home. This was the situation in New York City in 1864, for we read:

But take a walk down Broadway any fine Saturday, and you will find two thirds of the Jewish places of business open as usual, and their proprietors at their desks or by their counters - that is if you peep in after twelve - before that hour many of them are devout "pillars of the church."

It did not take long for merchants to give their entire Sabbath day to business.

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

¹ **The Making of an American Jewish Community, the history of Baltimore Jewry from 1773 to 1920** by Isaac M. Fein, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1971, page 119.

² *Ibid.*, page 120