

# My Feet Were Praying<sup>1</sup>

“Praying for freedom never did me any good ‘til I started praying with my feet.” – Frederik Douglas

“On the seventh day there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest, a sacred occasion. You shall do no work.” – Leviticus 23:2-3 (*Parshat Emor*)

We are blessed to live in a thriving democracy. Though American and Israeli democracy are both under threat, we still enjoy the rights to vote, assemble, speak our minds, and so forth. With these privileges come responsibilities, and new Jewish questions. Given that we live in a majority Christian country, most protests take place on Shabbat.

I’m less interested in “may a Jew protest on Shabbat?” both because most of us have already answered that with “yes,” and because even many Orthodox authorities agree that (at least under certain circumstances) we may do so.

I’m more interested in asking, “**How does one protest on Shabbat?**” So for the sake of this *drash*, we’ll assume that we know what rises to the level of a ‘calamity’ that requires us to sound the alarm and gather the crowd on Shabbat, crying out to God, taking actions we hope will bring our salvation from this calamity. (“For the following calamities an alarm is to be sounded” - Mishnah Ta’anit 3:7)

Those of us with more traditional Shabbat observance may write the signs on Thursday night, walk an especially long distance, or make sure the *eruv* is up. Yet, this is not enough. In the *haftarah* we read on Yom Kippur morning, the prophet Isaiah proclaims:

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If you restrain your foot because of the Sabbath from performing your affairs on My holy day, and you **call the Sabbath a delight...** and you honor it... **by not pursuing your affairs** and speaking words, then you shall delight with YHVH . . . – Isaiah 58:13

From this verse, the sages understood that we must be sure our Shabbat activities are different from our ordinary routine. Therefore, according to many interpretations of the *Shulchan Aruch (Orech Chaim 306)*, if something is considered a mundane activity (*uvdin dechol*), it should not be done on Shabbat, even if it isn't technically prohibited.

For example, it is permitted to converse on Shabbat as you do during the week, if that is what gives you pleasure. However, if something will cause anxiety, it is forbidden to speak of it or even to intentionally think about it on Shabbat (*Orech Chaim 306*).

Protesting often comes with speechmaking, chanting and shouting, which may be problematic for some and welcome for others. If it gives you joy to chant “no justice, no peace,” then there is no cause for concern. If this would interfere with your Shabbat peace, or worse, cause mental distress, then this is not an appropriate Shabbat activity for you. However, if you will be joining a group whose protest takes the form of silent vigil or singing a slow, peaceful “*Oseh Shalom*,” then there is probably less cause for concern.

And yet, this rule contains exceptions for the public need and for actions which are mitzvah-related. For example, because it is a mitzvah to return a lost object, we ask for anyone with knowledge of its

whereabouts to come forward, even if the object is forbidden to use on Shabbat! (*Orech Chaim* 306).

Yet, I fear that we lose too much when we declare that “justice justice you shall pursue” is a mitzvah, so therefore any action, at any protest, on any topic, is justifiable on Shabbat. In our troubled and democratic society, there are protests almost every weekend. So we must ask ourselves:

**Don’t we ourselves deserve a Shabbat?**

**Do my mind and spirit need a day away from the stresses of the world?**

**Does my body need physical rest or time in nature, rather than yet another day of walking, crowds, and noise?**

Does my family or community need me?

Is there a difference between something that feels important to me and something that is truly a national or municipal emergency?

My answers to each of these questions is, “Yes.” Therefore, I don’t go to every rally or vigil on a Saturday. I save my protesting on Shabbat for:

- a) large national gatherings, or
- b) for emergency actions that are time-bound.

On those occasions (e.g., President Trump’s inauguration) when I do protest on Shabbat, I ask two key questions: **How will my activities while protesting on Shabbat be substantially different** from my actions at a protest on a Sunday or Monday? **How will I set a positive example of Jewish values and behaviors** for Jews and gentiles alike?

Upon marching with Dr. King in Selma, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said: **“My feet were praying.”** He also famously flew to Rome on Yom Kippur to bring the Pope an urgent message regarding Vatican II. But let us remember that Heschel did not take Shabbos or traditional prayer lightly, rather they were among his greatest passions.

Heschel taught that prayer must be revolutionary, and that the Sabbath is a **“sanctuary in time”** (A.J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*). Shabbat is a time for joy. My hope is that when we are inevitably called to “pursue justice” on Shabbat, may we do so with our families and communities, in a spiritual frame of mind, **humbly rejoicing in our God-given ability to transform the world** as it is into the world as it should be.

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