

Where There's A Will, There's A Way

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When Haley Kops donned her ice skates last Friday night, it was the culmination of years of practice and another stop along an unlikely journey for a girl from a Modern Orthodox home in West Orange, New Jersey. While showing great promise as a young skater, she thought she had left behind the world of competitive figure skating once she returned from a year of seminary at Midreshet Amit in Israel, and began preparing to begin her studies in Touro Nursing School in New York. But then she received a fateful call. Boris Chait, the trainer of the Israeli Figure Skating Team, invited her to compete for a spot on the Israeli team in the Beijing Olympics. She would be partnered with Evgeny Krasnopolsky, who made aliyah with his family from Kyiv thirty years ago, at the age of three, to the Israeli town of Metullah. The pair began to practice non-stop- nine hour days on the rink starting early in the morning for months on end, followed by a competition in Germany at the end of September, and then continuing to train for the Olympics.

It may not have escaped your attention that the sport of figure skating does not easily comport with an observant lifestyle. First, it involves lengthy and close physical contact between two people who are not married or related to one another. In competition, both members of a pair wear costumes that are often quite revealing. Second, the competitions inevitably take place on Shabbos- as did Hailey and Evgeny's appearances at the Olympics.

Indeed, two weeks earlier, Evgeny was the flag bearer for the Israeli team for the opening ceremonies- also on Friday night. When asked by the JTA about balancing her skating with her religious commitment, she said,

“From a young age, I integrated the two. It is definitely normal for me,” she said. “When there’s a will, there’s a way.”

The reactions to her competition have been as predictable as they’ve been rapid. A more right-leaning colleague of mine described his Shulchan Aruch crying on his bookshelf.

Another friend, a proud member of the Modern Orthodox community, posted on Facebook that Hailey Kops inspires Orthodox Jewish girls everywhere, including her own daughter, who has returned to figure skating.

I’ve been thinking about this for a while now. Not about Hailey Kops herself, of course, or of her simplistic and mistaken understanding of Halacha. Our sages tell us¹ that we should not judge the choices made by others, even if they seem to be transparently wrong ones, until we are put in their position and face the same challenges they do. Not possessing the physique or desire to figure skate, and not knowing the religious struggles she faces, I am not about to judge her choices when faced with the tension between her excellence and her religious commitment. This is the same reason I will not question the rulings of the Rabbi she consulted, per an announcer on NBC, in navigating how to skate on Shabbos- especially

¹ Pirkei Avot 2:4

since I probably know that Rabbi... No, what I've been thinking about is what the *idea* of Hailey Kops says about *us*.

This week's Parsha begins with Moshe gathering the Jewish people and offering them detailed directives on how to build the Mishkan. He prefaces his remarks, though, with a reiteration of the prohibition against labor on Shabbos.

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִהְיֶה לָּכֶם קָדֹשׁ שַׁבָּתוֹן לַיהוָה כָּל־הַעֲשֶׂה בּוֹ מְלָאכָה יוּמָת:

On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a sabbath of complete rest, holy to God; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.

לֹא־תִבְעֲרוּ אֵשׁ בְּכָל מִשְׁכַּתֵיכֶם בַּיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת: {פ}

You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the sabbath day.

What is the connection between the commandment to observe Shabbos and the construction of the Mishkan? Many commentaries² explain that the two are juxtaposed to show that Shabbos is not overridden even by another mitzvah- and even if that mitzvah is one as lofty as building the Mishkan. In fact, this juxtaposition is what teaches us that the Mishkan itself is the blueprint for Shabbos observance; the 39 prohibited categories of labor are based upon the kinds of labor regularly performed in the Mishkan. But what would be so

² Bekhor Shor, Seforno and others

terrible if Mitzvot *did* override the Shabbos? Why, in fact, could the Mishkan not be built on Shabbos?

I'd like to suggest that if other mitzvot overrode Shabbos, it would open the door to rationalize *anything* as a mitzvah. Traveling to another city to visit a sick relative? Making a wedding on Shabbos with all the attendant preparations? Participating in an olympic competition because it is a kiddush Hashem that inspires young women everywhere? All these would be valid reasons to set Shabbos aside. The character of Shabbos would be totally altered because of the ease with which *anything* can be categorized as a mitzvah- and every Shabbos would involve a calculation as to whether it is actually necessary to observe it. No longer would Shabbos be a day that mandated our relaxation- it would be a day that forced our navigation.

In July of 2020, Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz, associate principal of general studies at SAR High School in Riverdale, penned an essay titled "The End Of Abundance" in which she wrote the following, about the Modern Orthodox community.

We educate more towards navigating between two worlds than what to do when one world conflicts with the other and we have to give something up. We train our students for synthesis, not sacrifice...

This manifests in the intellectual realm, certainly, in our belief that our students can study the best of contemporary scholarship and Torah and navigate nimbly in the challenging places where they collide and intersect. It manifests in the stories of Modern Orthodox

students getting the state basketball playoffs or the Mock Trial competition rescheduled so that they can both compete and observe Shabbat³...

Now, we know what and who Dr. Press Schwartz is talking about when she speaks about the State Basketball Championships, am I right? Go Bulldogs! But local pride aside, Dr. Press Schwartz is right. When you think about the stories we tell with admiration about the conflict between observance and ideals, it's stories like these. Sometimes they're not about *rescheduling* due to Shabbos conflicts- it's about figuring out how to make Shabbos "work" while still competing: staying in nearby hotels, walking to the venue and so on, as evidenced by the conversation surrounding Jacob Steinmetz when he was drafted by the Arizona Diamondbacks. Thank God, it is illegal in this country to discriminate against someone for keeping Shabbos, and those who save lives on Shabbos- physicians, paramedics and so on- are usually doing so with halachic sanction, as saving a life overrides Shabbos. As a result, we rarely hear stories about the people who sacrificed their jobs for Shabbos. Rav Moshe Taub, the Kaliver Rebbe, told a story of a man he knew who made a decoration for his Sukkah out of the many pink slips he received due to his refusal to work on Shabbos. He felt there was no more beautiful decoration than the evidence of his sacrifice for God. We don't know people like this anymore! Of course, we *must* fight for our rights and assert our ability to take the SATs, play the playoff game *and* keep Shabbos- and make mincemeat of our opponents while we're at it. Quite aside from any of Hailey Kops's choices, it is disappointing that she only had a 15th place finish to show for any of her Shabbos leniencies! We lose

³ <https://www.machonsiach.org/the-grand-conversation/2020/7/16/end-of-abundance>

something, though, when our conversation is only about how to “navigate” Shabbos, as it frames Shabbos as an inconvenience that must somehow be figured out.

But urging our conversation about Shabbos to change from synthesis to sacrifice is a hortatory message that will not resonate on its own. We can't ask or demand that people give up their lives, their career advancement, their athletic aspirations in favor of Shabbos if they don't know, or appreciate, what they are sacrificing *for*. In an interview this week on the popular podcast *Behind The Bima*, Rabbi Dr. Dovid Bashevkin, Director of Education for NCSY, encouraged parents not to wake up when their children are teenagers who are unenthused about Shabbos, or aren't really keeping it. Shabbos education begins when our children are four or five years old, or younger- and it involves modeling by parents. How is it done? The Netziv of Volozhin, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893) takes note of a phrase that opens the Parsha's directive about Shabbos.

וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִהְיֶה לָכֶם קֹדֶשׁ

The seventh day will be holy for you. Why does the Torah need to stress again that Shabbos is a day of holiness? And what is added by saying that it is holy “for us”?

The Netziv writes-

יְהִיָּה לָכֶם קֹדֶשׁ. יִגְהַגּוּ בּוֹ קְדוּשָׁה כֹּל א' לְפִי עֵרְכוּ. וּמִכַּאֲן הִנְהִיגוּ עִ"ה בּוֹ קְדוּשָׁה שְׁלֵא לְדַבֵּר בּוֹ שֶׁקֶר כְּדֵאִיתָא בְּדִמְאִי

פ"ה הלוקח פירות ממי שא"נ על המעשרות ושכח לעשרן שואלו בשבת ואוכל על פיו.

Aside from the actual, technical laws of Shabbos that are incumbent upon us to know and observe, everyone must imbue the day with sanctity, each one according to their abilities.

This involves tuning in to the innate sense of holiness the day contains. The Netziv writes that, in the times of the Beit Hamikdash, this innate sense was possessed by even the most duplicitous and ignorant people. Those who could not normally be trusted to remove tithes from their produce would still be believed if, on Shabbos, they said they had done so- because they possessed awe and reverence for Shabbos such that *they would not lie on Shabbos*.

It is up to us to create these lasting experiences, this innate sense of Shabbos awe and reverence, in our homes, by doing whatever we can to make it special and different, so that violating it would be unthinkable and that anything else would be the real sacrifice. A few years ago on Tisha B'Av, I shared with you excerpts from the account of Rav Pimchas Hirschprung (1910-1996), the late, revered Chief Rabbi of Montreal, of his recollections of life in the Polish town of Dukla at the time of the Nazi invasion of Poland- an account that may ring especially strongly in light of current events. One of the first decrees issued by the Nazis was an order requiring all Jews to keep their shops open on Shabbos. Because doing so could result in their death, and because saving a life is the only endeavor that supersedes Shabbos, they were permitted- indeed, required- to heed the evil directive. Rav Hirschprung writes, though-

"This evil decree caused indescribable anguish for the Jews of Dukla. Even the concept of "saving a life supersedes the Sabbath" could not relieve their distress. It was a matter of being able. Dukla Jews were simply not able to desecrate the Sabbath, even with a dispensation. To desecrate the Sabbath, even under coercion, is something that was not compatible with being

*a Dukla Jew. A Dukla Jew could not just divest himself overnight of the Sabbath holiness that gave him the vital strength he needed for the rest of the week.*⁴

This is the innate sense of Shabbos we must develop, a feeling we must instill within ourselves and our children. If we view Shabbos as a series of restrictions that we must seek to circumvent, as a burden or as a source of anxiety and stress, our children will do the same. If we reframe the conversation, though, and view Shabbos as an opportunity to recharge and reconnect, our children will view it that way.. Shabbos isn't a day when we *aren't allowed to* speak on the phone- it's a day when *we're allowed not to* speak on the phone.⁵ When Shabbos looks this way, nothing- no conference, no athletic event, no TV- will be even remotely enticing enough to compete.

Hailey Kops was right, after all. When there's a will, there's a way. Let us make Shabbos, and the Torah, our will- and in the many competing priorities we constantly face, let us always find a way for it to win.

⁴ I thank my colleague Rabbi Chaim Strauchler of Congregation Rinat Yisrael of Teaneck, New Jersey for reminding me and others of this passage.

⁵ This formulation was also articulated elsewhere by Rabbi Dr. Dovid Bashevkin