

How to make Shabbat an extraordinary day.

Shabbat is often the highlight of a Birthright Tour and can be life-changing particularly for participants who have never experienced a Shabbat before.

However an awesome Shabbat won't just happen on its own by virtue of the sun going down on a Friday night. It requires some serious planning to make sure you build a day which taps into the Shabbat spirit and create a day which is truly a day of rest, physically and spiritually.

We hope this IACT Shabbat guide will give some helpful guidance in what you can do to make the Shabbat on your Birthright trip as meaningful as possible.

Keeping the Timetable relaxed

Shabbat is such a change to the normal every day routine of the Birthright Trip. Whereas an average day is fast paced and busy, hopping on and off of buses, Shabbat is a far more relaxed day, and this is a very important aspect of the day to protect.

Like most things in life, the more you prepare for Shabbat the better it will be. The Jewish day starts at sundown, so the race is on to get everyone looking their finest for Friday night. It's important you give the group ample time they need to shower and get dressed for the occasion and look their best. When preparing for the trip, let them know that they will be expected to dress up for Friday night and to include smart clothes on their packing list. If sundown is at 7pm for example, you should allow 2 to three hours for the group to get themselves ready and show them that the pace of the trip is slowing down as Friday afternoon draws in.

Don't over program the Shabbat. It's important that there are group activities and you have some reflection activities, but make sure you program in a fair amount of time to catch up on sleep on Friday night, Shabbat morning and afternoon. The aspect of physical rest is an important part of the day with Shabbat described in the Lecha Dodi song as a spring of blessing. Just as a spring nourishes the land, so too a great rest, with good food and spirituality nourishes the rest of the week as well.

Spirituality

Judaism teaches that part of what makes Shabbat special is that we cease from our usual routines, and focus more on the spiritual. We do this through prayer, words of torah, song, reflection, rest and group unity.

Candle Lighting

It is the realm of the Jewish women to light the Shabbat candles. These are very special lights which we light primarily to protect the peace of the home. Not only will there be less accidents and bumping into things if there is light, but the spirit of Shabbat – signified by these lights- will shine brightly for us as well and help usher in atmosphere of calm, hope and peace.

The girls should be invited to come and light candles before sunset. Usually candles are set up by a hotel outside the dining room, but this is something you should ask when you arrive on a Friday afternoon. Some girls may not know the prayer to say when lighting candles, if so prepare this in advance to avoid embarrassment or just read the beracha and ask them to repeat after you.

When lighting candles it is customary for the women to pray for their families welfare, so this is a great opportunity to invite the girls to think about themselves, their families, their futures and the Jewish People before lighting these special candles. Each girl should light 2 candles, and then make the blessing.

The Kabbalat Shabbat prayer service.

The traditional Kaabbalat Shabbat service includes 6 psalms we sing which represent the 6 days of the working week, followed by the Lecha Dodi song written by the Kabbalists of Tsfat in the 15th century who used to walk out to the fields in song to usher in the Shabbat bride. Following this welcome through song, we sing a 7th psalm dedicated to Shabbat the 7th day of the week. The flow of the service is very much easing ourselves out of the 6 days of mundane work, into the elevated spiritual world of the 7th day where G-d ceased from creating and rested. By us resting too, we are emulating G-d and become more G-d like as a result. The service concludes with traditional evening prayers.

Don't feel obliged to stick exactly to this model if you don't think the group will connect to it. However, prayer is a big part of a traditional Shabbat, and being in Israel on a journey of Jewish awakening, it is appropriate that there be some kind of prayer service provided.

The more time you put into preparing this the more effective and accessible it will be for your participants. You may have participants who can't read Hebrew. If so, keep everything phonetic and translated so they can follow along to. Don't refrain from bringing Jewish content because the group isn't familiar with it, they are coming on a Birthright trip to learn and explore and have their horizons opened.

It's important to find the right location for your Kabbalat Shabbat service. Remember it is the time of sunset, so having the sun setting in the background can be truly stunning. You can tell a story, run a meditation, teach a song and bring some readings as well in English to create your own Birthright Friday night – We can remind our group of the famous quote by the thinker Ahad Ha'am who said, “More than the Jewish People has kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jewish People.”

Oneg Shabbat

An Oneg Shabbat is the name given to a session held Friday night after the meal with the group in which there are snacks, drinks and a chilled out peaceful atmosphere. The Oneg Shabbat is a great opportunity, to give a little inspiration and enter this more spiritual realm. You can tell a hassidic story or sing a song or share some uplifting reflections from the week. It is a great idea to let the group open up and share some quality time together. This should be led by a member of the tour's staff and group members can be invited to share thoughts about their favorite moments of the week, or a time they felt inspired. You can even structure this by passing round a cookie box and give everyone an opportunity to share something positive before taking a cookie.

When it comes to stories and resources for Shabbat, don't freak out if you feel that you lack resources or know how – either ask your Trip Organizer for ideas, consult a local community rabbi or educator – and definitely ask Rabbi Google! Start searching the internet for inspiring Jewish stories for Shabbat and texts for Shabbat you'll be amazed at what's out there.

Singing.

It's well worth preparing a few songs that you can teach your group to make Shabbat even more of a unifying and special experience. It's hard to explain exactly why singing in a group is such a positive and unifying experience, but it is and a Shabbat without singing is really missing that special ingredient.

When teaching a song keep it simple. Teach a short song, print it out so everyone can see a copy, and sing it first so the group know how the tune goes. If there's one tip about teaching a song, it's "Don't be shy." Even if it is a little embarrassing, your hard work will be richly rewarded when the group, all 45 of them can sing in unison. Even those who you think are 'too cool' will thank you for having given them a song to sing and a way to access greater unity and meaning.

Respecting the sanctity of the day.

Although few of your participants may be observant of Shabbat in their normal routines, it is important that the whole group be asked to do their best to maintain the sanctity of the day and refrain from doing anything that might offend anyone else. This will set the right tone with an atmosphere of peace and quiet especially in public spaces.

Ways to make Shabbat a truly bonding experience

We light two candles at the start of Shabbat but one candle with two wicks at Havdalah at the end of Shabbat. This journey of separation to unity is one which we can also add to as group leaders and there are things we can do help bring greater unity in the group.

Why not play the secret friends game, where each participant is given the name of another who they have to deliver secret gifts and compliments to throughout the trip. Each participant is given the name of another person on the trip and at the end of the Shabbat, secret friends reveal themselves and the group feels closer together!

Another idea is to try and arrange the tables where the group sits for meals on a Shabbat to be together in a way which is most sociable. It's not worth falling out with the kitchen staff over, but if possible meal times can feel more family style and closer.

Some staffers deliver candies with a special Shabbat Shalom messages to participants. You can be creative in how you set the tone as well, perhaps the staff can perform a shabbat story in the form of a play for the group to start the Shabbat. It might sound a little kindergarten style, but these kind of things can really help set a very sweet tone for the day.

Time to rest.

Don't over program the day. Allow your participants to feel that the day is different to all other days. Don't have a wake up call, and allow a long time to rest in the afternoon where the group can catch up on sleep!

The third meal.

If Friday night is the first meal and lunch on Shabbat is the second, the third meal comes on the afternoon just as Shabbat is starting to ebb away. This is considered a very auspicious time and a great opportunity to tell stories, sing a little and feel the moment as the day of rest slowly starts to fade away. One reason for this extra meal is that Kabbalah teaches that we are given an extra soul

on the Shabbat which requires extra nourishment. It is hard to create an ideal environment when you are sharing a large dining room with many other groups and this third meal often becomes a glorified dinner, but you can ask the group to get together with some light snacks and drinks in a beautiful quiet location and run something with more ambiance as well. Whatever you do... make sure you have snacks provided!

Havdalah

Havdalah means separation and the Havdalah ceremony distinguishes between Shabbat and the rest of the week. Blessings are made over wine, spices and the flame.

The Wine

Wine plays a great role in Jewish life and tradition as well. It is considered a holy drink – the only liquid drink that, before consuming, has its own special blessing. Wine is part of all life cycle events in Jewish life. It appears at weddings and circumcisions, redemptions of the first-born and in Talmudic times at the house of the mourners. Wine is meant to inspire and comfort us, to lend dignity and importance to an occasion, to raise an ordinary or even extraordinary human event to a higher spiritual level.

Spice

The extra soul we have on Shabbat leaves us at Havdalah and so we refresh ourselves by smelling spices. When a soul leaves a person, it does through their nostrils and so, we replenish our bodies from losing the shabbat soul by smelling the spice. This should give us strength for the week ahead.

The Flame

Fire constitutes the physical pursuit of work, making fire illustrates our ability to once again be creative forces in the world, and as we gaze at the flames reflecting in our finger nails we are encouraged to go out and once again be creative in the world for another six days.

For the Havdalah ceremony, the group can be asked to form a circle with the leader in the center with volunteers each holding the spice and the flame. You can open the havdalah service with some words, thanking the group for a wonderful shabbat.