



MIDEI CHODESH

B'CHADSHO

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Beginning Early and Ending Late: The Power of Uncertainty

Did you ever ask yourselves the questions: *Why do we start Shabbat early, and end Shabbat late? Why do we begin Shabbat at sunset, yet end the day at nightfall?*

The answers to these questions will take us into a fascinating halachic realm and provide some life lessons in the bargain...

A period of uncertainty is built into each day of the Jewish calendar. This period rises out of a fundamental calendar fact: *The Jewish day begins at night.*

Day's "nightly beginning" finds its roots in the Torah's narrative of creation, where the text closes its description of each creational day with the declaration, "And it was evening and it was morning, [fill in the day]." Recognizing that every word of God's law is deliberately chosen and placed, the rabbis determine that, from a divine perspective, evening precedes

morning. Each day, therefore, starts at night.

Simple enough, it would seem...

The rabbis, however, find themselves facing a quandary. *When exactly, they ask, does "night" arrive and the next day begin. Does the Jewish day begin at sunset or nightfall?*

This question is never conclusively answered...

As a result, a unique daily period emerges: the interval between sunset and nightfall; *Bein Ha'shemashot*, "Between the Suns." Dusk, the time when it is no longer clearly day; but not yet clearly night.

In the words of the rabbis, *Bein Ha'shemashot* "is *safek yom, safek layla*, a period of time that could possibly be day and could possibly be night." This is a period of uncertainty; we are not sure if the moments of *Bein Ha'shemashot* belong to the end of the departing day; or to the beginning of the next day.

From a Halachic perspective, the existence of *Bein Ha'shemashot* is nothing short of astounding! Jewish law is always precise when it comes to time-bound issues. Times are pinpointed to the minute. Examples abound: "The last time to recite Kriat Shma is 9:22; Shacharit must be

concluded by 10:46; Chametz must be destroyed by 11:21, etc.” Given the usual exactitude of halacha concerning matters of time, why are the rabbis content leaving the definition of *Bein Ha’shemashot* “uncertain?”

Carefully laid personal plans have been upended, businesses closed, travel suspended

This issue has practical implications. The very existence of *Bein Ha’shemashot* creates halachic difficulties. Our oldest child, Avi, for example, was born over forty years ago on Friday night during *Bein Ha’shemashot*. The problem facing us was obvious. When was he actually born, on Friday or Shabbat? We could not conduct his *Brit Mila* the next Friday, because he might have actually been born on Shabbat. If so, Friday would have been the 7th day to his birth, a day too early for a *Brit Mila*. We also could not conduct his *Brit Mila* the next Shabbat, because he might have actually been born on Friday. If so, a Shabbat *Brit* would be prohibited because only a baby definitely born on Shabbat can have a Shabbat *Brit Mila*. We were forced to push the *Brit* to Sunday, the 9th or 10th day after his birth.

Wouldn’t it have been easier to just make up our minds concerning *Bein Ha’shemashot*?

And yet, perhaps we are approaching this issue incorrectly. Perhaps *Bein*

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Ha'shemashot is not the product of indecision but of deliberate decision. *Bein Ha'shemashot* exists because Jewish tradition consciously wants to build a period of uncertainty into each of our days.

In a world driven to be “certain;” to solve all mysteries, to predict everything from the stock market to the weather, to forecast and control the future, to cure all illness, and more; how important it is for us to recognize that full certainty in our lives will always be elusive. God is the ultimate arbiter of our existence. Only He truly knows what tomorrow will bring. Our tradition therefore insists on the existence of *Bein Ha'shemashot*. *Part of each day must be left “uncertain”- to serve as a daily, built-in reminder of our inability to achieve full certainty- no matter how advanced, knowledgeable and sophisticated we might become.*

How clearly this message of *Bein Ha'shemashot* has been delivered to us today, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Carefully laid personal plans have been upended, businesses closed, travel suspended, weddings and other major events cancelled or dramatically modified. In spite of our technological prowess, we have been laid low by a microscopic virus; suddenly finding ourselves in a world that we could scarcely have imagined a few months ago. Never, in our personal experience, has life felt so uncertain...

But we need, I believe, to go one step further. The message of *Bein Ha'shemashot* strikes an even deeper chord: *Life's*

uncertainty is not a “necessary evil” but a “necessary good.”

The existence of uncertainty serves as the true engine of human achievement. If all were certain, there would be no need to strive. It is precisely because we don't know what the future will bring; the obstacles we might face or the full extent of the heights to which we might aspire; that we are pushed to move forward and accomplish. *Bein Ha'shemashot is woven into the fabric of our days to sensitize us to the important, positive role that uncertainty plays in our lives.* We will ultimately be judged, not by how we act when times are clear, but by how we respond when faced with life's *Bein Ha'shemashot*.

Returning to the world of practicality, however, we have not yet addressed the question with which we began: Why do we start Shabbat early and end Shabbat late?

To answer this question, we must factor in one other halachic construct. How does Jewish law deal with uncertainty? What happens when we are confronted with a phenomenon such as *bein ha'shemashot* at the beginning and end of the Shabbat day?

Here, halacha provides clear direction. The practical rule established by the rabbis is: *Safek d'Oraita l'chumra; Safek d'rabbanan l'kula*, uncertain matters of biblical law are determined stringently; uncertain matters of rabbinic law are determined leniently.

We can now understand why Shabbat begins at sunset but ends at nightfall...

When we encounter the uncertain

period of *bein ha'shemashot* on Friday evening, we encounter a problem of Torah law. How is this period to be defined: as part of Friday or as part of Shabbat? Since the observance of Shabbat is biblically ordained, we must rule stringently. We are forced to define the interval between sunset and nightfall on Friday night as Shabbat, as the beginning of the arriving day.

When again we encounter the uncertain period of *Bein Ha'shemashot* on Saturday evening, we return to an issue of uncertainty and biblical law: is this interval to be viewed as the end of Shabbat or as the beginning of Sunday? True to our halachic principles, we must once again, rule stringently and define *Bein Ha'shemashot* as part of the departing day, Shabbat.

Clearly, this second halachic conclusion contradicts the first. On Friday evening we define *bein ha'shemashot* as the beginning of Shabbat, *the arriving day*, while on Saturday we consider this period to be the end of Shabbat, *the departing day*.

Nonetheless, in spite of this inherent contradiction, the ruling stands. We consider each encounter with *bein ha'shemashot* independently. In each case we act in accordance with halachic principle that requires a stringent ruling when dealing with *safek*, uncertainty, concerning biblical law,

Shabbat will thus begin at sunset, but end at nightfall.¹ The important lessons of

Bein Ha'shemashot must be preserved... ■

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin's Dvar Torah is featured each month marking the new Hebrew Month on Shabbat Mevarchim HaChodesh.

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1. *Rabbinic authorities delineate a fundamental responsibility to “add from the secular to the sacred” in connection with Shabbat and the holidays. On a practical level, this obligation requires that we add at least a few additional minutes to each of these holy days at both ends of the day, at its opening and at its close. These holy days are thus actually observed from moments before sunset to moments after nightfall.*
 2. *In our discussion we have treated sunset, nightfall and Bein Ha'shemashot as fixed, accepted points and intervals in time. Such is not the case. In typical rabbinic fashion, the rabbis debate such issues as: whether halachic sunset refers to the beginning or end of the celestial event, when nightfall actually occurs, and, consequently, the length of time that constitutes Bein Ha'shemashot.*

Due to these disagreements, different practices have developed concerning the beginning and ending of Shabbat and the Festivals. Common practice is to follow the majority opinion that begins these occasions slightly before the sun begins to set on the horizon and defines nightfall (and the end of these occasions) to be roughly forty-five minutes after the beginning of Sunset.

1 Two final halachic clarifications...