

Some daylight on Western-style weekends in Israel

by

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With increasing frequency, the public discourse in Israel has been focusing on moving the country to a Western-style Saturday-Sunday weekend. As a result of Shabbat constraints and Israel's subsequent unique Friday work habits, which are taken as given, the discussion tends to revolve around moving to a 4.5-day – or possibly even a four day – work week in order to bridge over the constraints. One possibility along these lines involves lengthening the remaining work days (Monday-Thursday) in order to make up the hours that are lost when merging the Western weekend with Israeli religious constraints on Fridays.

What this latter possibility does not take into account is that Israelis already work more hours each week than the citizens of most developed countries, while the country's labor productivity is consistently among the lowest in the West. A key assumption in economic theory, declining marginal productivity, suggests that lengthening the number of work hours in a day may reduce Israel's already low productivity even further.

Another possibility bandied about is to simply reduce the total number of weekly work hours, which then begs the question of who will pay for this – workers with lower wages or employers who receive less output but will be required to continue paying the same wages? There is a conjecture that a leisure culture will develop that will increase revenues and soften the economic blow – at least for firms in the leisure business. But how much could leisure spending possibly rise in a country in which the income of 50% of its citizens is so low that they do not pay any income tax at all?

So much for the conventional approaches. Some outside-the-box thinking could yield a relatively simple solution to this issue – requiring a transformation in attitude that is primarily cultural rather than religious. In fact, Israel's opening position is even better than that of cities such as New York, London and Paris, which have large working religious Jewish populations.

On December 21, the shortest day of the year, there are eight hours of daylight in London and Paris, nine hours in New York – and 10 daylight hours in Israel. The sun rises at 8:41 in Paris, 8:03 in London, 7:16 in New York and at 6:35 in Jerusalem. Leaving Israel on daylight saving time for the entire year would resolve the weekend issue immediately. Sunrise would be at 7:35, similar to other cities, but sunset would be much later in Israel.

When the Israeli sun will set at 5:39 P.M. on the shortest day of the year – and later on every other day – there will be no reason why Friday could not become a regular work day, like in every other developed country. Religious people are able to successfully contend with this in the rest of the world, and it would be even easier for them to do so in Israel – and they would gain Sunday off without the attendant religious limitations that accompany our current weekend days of Friday-Saturday.

This leaves only the cultural question: Are we ready to give up on one of the iconic trademarks of the Jewish state – the unique atmosphere preceding and accompanying the beginning of Shabbat on Friday afternoon? As a completely non-religious person, I am not sure that I would adopt my own suggestion above. But at least the choice would become much simpler and it would remove the primary economic arguments that have so weighed on the discussion until now.