

The Shabbos away

Shabbos with your group can be extremely powerful and as long as you don't do anything stupid (like flip-out or forget to buy food), there is really not much you can do to ruin it. Below I will discuss a few things I've learned over the years, but the truth is that you don't really need to do much of anything.

Everything below is about a Shabbos as part of a longer program either in Israel or some other location. But most of these things can easily be applied to any Shabbos program you do.

Getting ready

Make sure your group shows up on time. On most programs away, the first Shabbos is usually after the group has been together for almost a week. They are used to you, worn out from a week of running around, and will probably take their time enjoying their first hot shower and putting on nice clothes. You can either be a dictatorial fascist (and get bent out of shape because no one is listening to you), or you can try a trick. The trick I use is scheduling a class for about one hour before candle lighting. I assume everyone will be late and prepare a 15-20 minute *vort*. The class kills two birds with one stone:

1. You need a class to introduce Shabbos to your group anyway
2. Even if everyone is incredibly late for your class, who cares, you still got them there in time for Shabbos

The class I teach is a short talk about the beauty of Shabbos (I have a handful of short, standard Shabbos talks), an overview of the Friday night davening, and a very basic introduction to Shabbos *halacha*. (Make sure to mention that it is permissible to flush the toilet on Shabbos – this sometimes comes up and it is always awkward.)

Instead of a class, some people enjoy a pre-Shabbos *kumzits*. If you can't guarantee that your *kumzits* will be incredible and that your group will respond well to it, then avoid at all costs. It can be extremely cheesy, nerdy, and a real turn-off to anyone cool. Make sure well in advance that your group is an emotional, semi-hippie bunch of bearded, flannel-wearing, happy people, and if that is indeed the case, make it clear to your musician (and it is always best to use someone from your group) that this is not a "concert" or "performance" – it is about getting the group spiritually pumped for Shabbos. Stick to Jewish music, and *niggunim* are better than songs with words.

Finally, make sure that you and your staff all *daven Mincha* early. There is always a lot of confusion as Shabbos arrives – the women need to light, the men will all suddenly want yarmulkes, you will realize that you don't have any *siddurim* in English – and it will add to the chaos if you disappear to pray.

Friday night davening

Just like it is hard to ruin Shabbos, it is also next to impossible to ruin Friday night davening. I have taken groups to every type of *minyán* imaginable – boring, dance marathons, fast, musical sensations, Sfardi, modern, Chasidus, everything – it has never had any negative effect, but very rarely made a major positive impact either. When all is said and done, the Friday night service is only about one hour at the beginning of Shabbos, once you start your meal and the night rolls on, Friday night davening is all but forgotten.

The Carlebach-style service is a “nice” thing to do, but in my opinion is the most overdone, overblown, and unnecessary thing in kiruv. Very few people know how to do it well, and oftentimes the chazzan is not in touch with how the group is responding (making it long and boring). Some people love the Carlebach-style service and I have even seen groups go nuts over a very mediocre chazzan. My point is not that you shouldn't do it – it is that you don't have to do it.

The main thing to be aware of during Friday night davening is that your students are comfortable and that you are not torturing them.

The Friday night meal

Friday night is best as a group meal – keep everyone together and don't split up and send to families.

After you round everyone up, sit them however you please and then start with the standard “*Shalom Aleichem*” (do the slow version everyone knows) and then “*Aishes Chayal*.” You should have a few one-liners explaining everything and standard *schtick* (I like to sing really loud and I have a few bad jokes I always tell).

Kiddush – you should make Kiddush, don't let a student do it (even the *frum* ones usually mess it up). Make sure that you do not sing the standard melody everyone knows. If even just a few people know it, they will sing along, drown you out, and no one will be *yotze*. I do it loud, and start to rush a little when I get to the part everyone knows. They usually think I am a lousy singer (which is true), but who cares,

we did Kiddush properly. I also announce beforehand that "I will have them in mind and that they should have in mind that I am having them in mind." This is funny, but also focuses everyone *l'halacha*.

Hamotzi – for some reason, even the most active go-getters won't get up to wash. They want to do it, but just sit there and stare at each other. Divide up the group, loudly announce who should get up and where they should wash, and publicly appoint people (staff, student leaders, and students you want to give responsibility to) to help with the blessings. Makes sure that your whole group knows:

1. Not to talk once they washed
2. To wait for you to make the blessing before they eat

As is true with everything, you need to clearly announce this beforehand as well.

The meal – this is when everything starts to happen. A few rules:

1. Don't try to force it, let your group enjoy each other and (especially after *hamotzi*) let them sit and shmooze for a while
2. Alert your wait staff that the meal should run quickly, no downtime until dessert. As you finish and clear up the fish, they should be ready with soup, etc

Speeches – nominate a few people from your group to speak or to make a *l'chaim* (don't let them know in advance, give them a few minutes warning and that is it). You should also prepare a short *d'var* Torah – it does not need to be from the *Parsha*, it should be 5+ minutes long and inspirational.

Songs – as much as you may love those long dirges that are standard at your Shabbos table. Do not do them. (You may have a newly *frum* *madrish* who insists on doing one – stop him at all costs). You should do the cheesy, campy, upbeat standards that are in the back of the NCSY Bentcher – they are fun and will add *ruach*. If you hate singing, you can skip them, but I find with large group meals that singing helps focus the group (because the shmoozing can go on forever), and that it adds energy.

If your Friday night meal is going incredibly well, and your group is an emotional bunch and in addition, feels very close and connected, then once you nominate a few people to speak, the rest of the group will be inspired and start making impromptu toasts and short talks. This does

not always happen. Even with Friday night meals that are going well, sometimes the group isn't so emotional and they won't say anything – this is ok. Know your group and don't stress. I have seen some groups leave and go out after a two-hour meal, others talk and cry until the wee-hours of the evening, and still others sing, dance and even split up the men and women for dancing, everything – it is all good. Go with the energy and go to bed early if your group is hot to get out of there.

The *oneg* – it goes without saying that the best option is to stay in the room that you are eating your meal in, and to keep the group there and connected all night long. Do not feel that you have to go somewhere or meet “cool” people to extend the evening. The energy of being together is what makes a great Shabbos. Adding “outsiders” and “extras,” especially on Friday night, is unnecessary and usually defeats the purpose. If for some reason you needed to split up your group and send them out to families for Friday night, then an *oneg* at a central meeting place is in order. Expect a few people to not show up. Serve nosh, prepare a few good stories, and hope for the best.

Shabbos day

You are an evil, insensitive, and unthinking boob if you try to make your group show up for Shabbos morning davening. No self-respecting college student will ever get out of bed early, especially to suffer through a long, drawn-out morning of prayer. Assuming that your group will be going to local families for lunch (the preferred option), schedule a group Kiddush (or better, sponsor the Kiddush at the *shul* your staff will be davening at) and insist that everyone gets there on time (call the Kiddush for at least a half an hour before it will actually happen). Note – as the “Rabbi” representing your group, it is imperative that you show up for davening on time and behave like a *mentch* during services (the temptation to shmooze about the night before with your staff is great – do not do it). Show your host community that you are a serious *ben Torah*.

Make sure to get a list of all host families and to find out as much as you can about them before Shabbos. Also make sure to decide what students are going to what family, and to make your list before Shabbos begins. At Kiddush, get introduced to all the hosts, thank them, remind them that your students “need to be back for a class at location X at time Y,” and then introduce them to your students.

If you are smart, you will wash at Kiddush. Once all your students and staff have been placed and sent off to their meals, you can *bentch*,

rest, *daven mincha*, and prepare your afternoon classes. If you are a social butterfly, go and meet the locals, but I can't think of anything more painful than sitting at a "kiruv Shabbos table" on a Shabbos afternoon when I could be sleeping off the *chulent* from Kiddush. Most "kiruv Shabbos" meals last for hours – very painful and you need to be well rested to run your afternoon activities.

If you need to run a group Shabbos lunch, remember that your students are tired and that this meal is the low point of Shabbos (energy wise). Keep it short, serve minimal courses, keep talking and singing to a minimum, and get your group back to the hotel for a rest or free time. [A note about *chulent*: as shocking as it may seem, there are some kiruv professionals who oppose serving new students *chulent*. It may be a stretch to call them heretics, but I think they are wrong. The *klal* with *chulent* is if you love it, your students will too. Talk about it and get excited about it, your students will do the same and will attempt to make one when they get home. Another mystery about *chulent* is that your students will find it difficult to pronounce – I have no explanation for this.]

Shabbos afternoon

If your group went to families for lunch, they will be happy, buzzing with excitement about the great new people they met, and full from the extreme amounts of food they were served. Be forewarned, as soon as they sit down they will fade, doze, beg for coffee, and get cranky. Do not torture them with a class or lecture. Schedule an interactive workshop or forum, pick a hot topic, and let them do most of the talking. This is not only the best way to keep your group awake, but also a great way to introduce a controversial topic and to do it in a non-confrontational way (I usually do a forum either about intermarriage or a general discussion about marriage and dating). You should schedule your talk to start between one and two hours before Third Meal. If it goes well, it will go overtime and will continue in private discussions during Third Meal.

Third Meal

Contrary to popular belief, Third Meal is the most important aspect of Shabbos and the highlight of your group Shabbos experience.

At Third Meal, energy is king. Try to arrange the seating so your group is together at one table (or at least close and packed together). Sing *niggunim*, place your staff around the room and make sure they are all singing as well. Follow the same rules about speaking and nominating students as Friday night, but make sure that your talk is emotional,

about the power of unity, Shabbos, and emphasize the special-ness of your group and your time together. In most programs, if the last Shabbos is only a day or two before your group leaves, then Third Meal will be the effective “end” of your program. Everything that happens afterwards (including your farewell banquet) is all an anticlimactic afterthought.

Havdalah

Whenever possible, *Havdalah* should be run immediately after you finish Third Meal and before *Ma'ariv*. Unlike the oftentimes-unnecessary Carlebach-style davening Friday night, I find the singing (especially with dim lights) at *Havdalah* to be very powerful and moving. Do not let a student lead *Havdalah*; either you or a respected senior member of your staff should do it. Explain everything before you begin and give a very quick *vort* about the mystical power of *Havdalah*. Sing, turn off the lights, play guitars, set things on fire, and enjoy. An oppressively long *Havdalah* lasts ten minutes; don't worry if it is less.

When *Havdalah* is over, Shabbos is over. Leave your group alone (especially in the summer). Let them go on the town and get away from you. Don't worry, Shabbos sunk in, it made a great impression and your group was blown away. Eat pizza with your staff, check your emails, call your family, and go to sleep.