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## Should Pomp Trump Shabbat?

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Commencement is the capstone of the higher education experience. But it's not a requirement to graduate. Some students want no part of the pomp and circumstance. A few boycott it because of politics — theirs or the school's. Others stay away for religious reasons. With this last group lies an emotional rub.

Graduation day for many universities this year is Saturday. The University of Michigan handed out undergraduate degrees on Saturday, April 29. Wayne State University will do so on Saturday, May 6. Notably, MSU will do the honors at 1 p.m. Friday, May 5.

Saturday, of course, is Shabbat, which presents a dilemma for observant Jews. Attending graduation then violates the Halachah, or Jewish law, they say. Not so fast, say others; graduation can co-exist with Shabbat if done with respect for religious practices. Many schools with significant Jewish enrollment strive to be accommodating.

It's a complicated halachic question.

In the wake of a student-circulated petition with signatures from students and supporters protesting Wayne State's commencement this Saturday — on an urban campus without a hotel district — I began to wonder about the clarity of what's at the core of the controversy. The petition cites Saturday as a holy day for Jews and Seventh-day Adventists.

Rabbi Avraham Jacobovitz of the Oak Park-based Machon L'Torah/Jewish Learning Network of Michigan spends much of his time working on university campuses to ignite interest in Judaism among Jewish students and to help inspire them to be proud of their ethnicity. His hope is that these students will strengthen their Jewish ties and beliefs. He's Orthodox but never tries to force students beyond a level of study, ritual or observance that they feel comfortable with.

He says flat out that a Saturday commencement violates Jewish law. For example, carrying a diploma in the public domain (beyond the range of an eruv) would be forbidden. Ditto for driving, entering a metal detector, carrying an umbrella or using a mike. "Even with innovative halachic solutions to avoiding violations," Rabbi J says, "commencement is not in the spirit of Shabbat."

Still, his Jewish Resource Center in Ann Arbor remains non-judgmental. "For parents of graduating seniors coming in for the weekend, we have Friday night dinner, Shabbos lunch — as proper a Shabbos as possible. We're as supportive and accommodating as possible without breaking any traditions."

Over the years, Jewish students have asked U-M to move graduation to another day. "It's like fighting city hall," Rabbi J says. "It's too ingrained. I wish we could change it."

While a Sunday graduation wouldn't violate Christian law, it would conflict with churchgoers and those who view that day

as a day of rest much like Shabbat. Holding graduation early on a Friday like MSU is doing this week is one option; the program would end before Shabbat, which doesn't begin until after 8 p.m. this time of year. Friday, however, could be problematic for Muslim students. Graduation early on a Thursday night would be less disruptive for travelers than, say, one on a Tuesday night. It gets dark by 8:45, however. Some schools offer private or smaller ceremonies in addition to the large ones.

U-M Hillel Assistant Director Rabbi Jason Miller signed the WSU petition. The Conservative rabbi sees clear differences between U-M and WSU. At Michigan, he finds "a very small minority" of students who don't attend commencement because it is held on Shabbat. He says the university works with observant families by assuring adequate hotel rooms within walking distance of the stadium and by providing staff to carry commencement tickets from Will Call to the entrance. He maintains that there's nothing students must do at commencement that would directly violate Halachah.

Beyond that, many observant students attend U-M football games on Shabbat. Arguably, they've figured out a way to make that mesh with Shabbat.

Wayne State had been holding commencement on a Thursday night at Detroit's Cobo Center but construction there forced a move outside. A Saturday was chosen; the day after was the backup date. "WSU did arrange for some accommodations near the football stadium and for kosher meals for religiously observant families," said petition supporter Talya Drissman, 28, of Oak Park, a WSU graduating law student. "However, these families will still be unable to take pictures, carry cameras or fully participate in the celebration of a family member's graduation from college."

Hillel of Metro Detroit would be stretched in trying to do what U-M Hillel did last weekend: offer 200-plus people a catered, sit-down Shabbat dinner followed by a Shabbat lunch.

Rabbi J's words grabbed me: "Graduation is supposed to be a time of celebration, of a great sense of accomplishment, for students and parents. It's very unfortunate that in a free country, sensitive to religious and ethnic issues, there's insensitivity shown toward Jewish observance."

We're talking about public universities. But Jews are in the minority. So how closely must schools adhere to Jewish tradition? Is Saturday commencement a public embarrassment to the observant Jewish community like Rabbi J suggests? Or is it just a convenience for most students and their families?

Jews who follow Halachah have most at stake. They can choose not to attend commencement, they can try to make reasonable adjustments or they can rally for change. Drissman says more than 20 observant students at Wayne State will miss commencement this Shabbat.

I can't defend Saturday commencement but it won't be changed easily despite the religious freedoms in America. It's clearly a popular choice.

Still, campus enrollment is more diverse than ever. Smart, innovative people run universities. It's tough to believe the commencement predicament can't be resolved by spring 2007.

Circumstances at Wayne State dictate a high degree of urgency to create a friendlier graduation environment for all. The school has a critical mass of observant students caught between their Shabbat needs and the conflicts of a Saturday graduation.

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