

Why is public transportation a question in Israel? And how are cooperatives an answer?

In most countries, public transportation is taken for granted. In Japan commuter trains are known to be crowded, in Brazil buses can be dangerous, but no one questions whether they should run. In Israel, a country whose founding fathers sought normalcy, transportation is indicative of anything but that.

Public transportation in Israel is limited by religious dictation. Although polls show that more than 70% of the public supports transportation 24/7, Israel politicians, cowering at the religious and mostly ultra-religious demands, restrict public transportation according to the hours of the Sabbath. Public transportation in Israel shuts down well before the Sabbath begins and resumes only well after it has left. The result is that people cannot visit friends and family and can't reach centers where activity is permitted (movie theaters, for example, and other forms of entertainment are open and running on weekends). These restrictions are a huge source of resentment and anger both at the religious establishment that demand the enforcement of prohibitions and at the politicians who submit to them.

Recently, a number of grassroots initiatives have challenged this situation. Rather than merely venting frustrations, activists in several cities, first in Jerusalem, have begun offering alternatives. "Shabus" is a cooperative, the creation of a group of social activists who were determined to establish a practical, accessible and fully legal mode of transportation in Jerusalem on weekends. Since it is private, the Ministry of Transportation hasn't raised objections to it. Since it is a non-profit, it is made easy for anyone to join.

The creators of Shabus sought a way to help the many people of all ages – particularly the young and elderly – without cars or licenses who feel trapped on weekends. |For apart from the religious confrontation, the prohibition on public transportation creates a great social gap: although the slightly older and more financially secure population is able to enjoy the burgeoning urban life, tens of thousands of Jerusalemites, including the forty thousand students in the city, thousands of soldiers, the elderly, as well as young people (most of whom do not own cars) are denied the opportunity to enjoy their leisure time as they please. Shabus is particularly important to people who live in the periphery of Jerusalem for whom the only alternative is taxis, which are prohibitively expensive, and to people with disabilities for whom a long walk or a bicycle ride is not a feasible option.

[su_youtube url="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoGNbf9rKrA" width="500" height="200"]

Video Caption: "I want to visit my grandmother on the other side of town on Saturday," "I want to take my daughter to the Biblical zoo but I don't have a car..." Shabus! Have you had enough? We too, so a few of us met and created Shabus, a weekend transportation service.

Furthermore, the founders of Shabus sought to promote public transportation all week long. Many people would happily forgo their cars, thereby minimizing the congestion and improving the air in the city, were public transportation available on weekends. Especially since the advent of the light rail, an increasing number of Jerusalemites express willingness to make use of greener ways of getting around town, but knowing they'll be stranded on weekends discourages them.

Finally, Shabus is a great answer to the growing problem of drinking under the influence of alcohol. Most riders of Shabus are under the age of 25, with a majority being soldiers home for the weekend. Soldiers commonly drink on their evenings home and are usually overtired. Shabus has become a popular means of insuring their safety. On Shabus, soldiers on leave can meet, socialize, drink, and be brought home safely – without endangering themselves or others by driving without necessary caution.

Shabus and its sister cooperatives need to continue to grow to reach the volume which will enable them to be financially self-sustaining. In the meantime, they rely on donations and ideological supporters to help them cultivate a wide enough base to bring about the change they seek: making themselves obsolete by finally prompting politicians to do what the public expects of them by allowing public transportation on weekends. When they do so, these cooperatives will not only be making mobility a possibility for all but will be helping break the extremist monopoly and taking one step further in allowing Israel to become the pluralist and just society that most Israelis and Jews hope it will be.