

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

In Vayakhel we meet for the second time the man who became the symbol of the artist in Judaism, Bezalel. "Then Moses said to the Israelites, 'See, the Lord has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills-to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts...'" (Ex. 35: 30-33)

It would be Bezalel, together with Ohaliab, who would make the tabernacle and its furnishings and be celebrated through the centuries as the inspired craftsman who used his skills for the greater glory of God.

The aesthetic dimension of Judaism has tended to be downplayed, at least until the modern era, for obvious reasons. The Israelites worshipped the invisible God who transcended the universe. Other than the human person, God has no image. Even when he revealed himself to the people at Sinai, "You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice" (Deut. 4: 12). Given the intense connection-until around the eighteenth century-between art and religion, image-making was seen as potentially idolatrous. Hence the second of the ten commandments: "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" (Ex. 20: 4).

This concern continued long after the biblical era. The Greeks, who achieved unrivalled excellence in the visual arts, were, in the religious sphere, still a pagan people of myth and mystery, while the Romans had a disturbing tendency to turn Caesars into gods and erecting statues to them.

However the visual dimension was not wholly missing from Judaism. There are visible symbols, like tzitzit and tefillin. There is, according to the sages, a meta-mitzvah known as hiddur mitzvah-"beautifying the command"-to try to ensure that all objects used in the performance of a command are as beautiful as possible.

The most significant intrusion of the aesthetic dimension was the in Tabernacle itself, its framework and hangings, its furniture, the cherubim above the ark, the menorah, and the vestments of the priests and the

high priest, lekavod uletifaret, "For dignity and beauty" (Ex. 28: 2).

Maimonides in The Guide for the Perplexed (III:45) says that most people are influenced by aesthetic considerations, which is why the Sanctuary was designed to inspire admiration and awe; why a continual light burned there; why the priestly robes were so impressive; why there was music in the form of the Levitical choir; and why incense was burned to cover the smell of the sacrifices.

Maimonides himself, in the work known as The Eight Chapters-the introduction to his commentary on Mishnah Avot-speaks about the therapeutic power of beauty and its importance in counteracting depression: "Someone afflicted with melancholy may dispel it by listening to music and various kinds of song, by strolling in gardens, by experiencing beautiful buildings, by associating with beautiful pictures, and similar sorts of things that broaden the soul..." (ch.5)

Art, in short, is balm to the soul. In modern times the thinker who spoke most eloquently about aesthetics was Rav Kook. In his Commentary to the Siddur he wrote, "Literature, painting and sculpture give material expression to all the spiritual concepts implanted in the depths of the human soul, and as long as even one single line hidden in the depth of the soul has not been given outward expression, it is the task of art [avodat ha-umanut] to bring it out" (Olat Re-ayah, II, 3).

Evidently these remarks were considered controversial, so in later editions of the Commentary the phrase "Literature, painting and sculpture" was removed and in its place was written, "Literature, its design and tapestry."

The name Bezalel was adopted by the artist Boris Schatz for the School of Arts and Crafts he founded in Israel in 1906, and Rav Kook wrote a touching letter in support of its creation. He saw the renaissance of art in the Holy Land as a symbol of the regeneration of the Jewish people in its own land, landscape and birthplace. Judaism in the Diaspora, removed from a natural connection with its own historic environment, was inevitably cerebral and spiritual, "alienated." Only in Israel would an authentic Jewish aesthetic emerge, strengthened by and in turn strengthening Jewish spirituality.

Perhaps the most moving of all remarks Rav Kook made about art came in the course of a conversation he had with a Jewish sculptor: "When I

lived in London I used to visit the National Gallery, and my favourite pictures were those of Rembrandt. I really think that Rembrandt was a Tzaddik. Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt's works, they reminded me of the rabbinic statement about the creation of light? We are told that when God created light [on the first day of creation, as opposed to the natural light of the sun on the fourth day], it was so strong and pellucid, that one could see from one end of the world to the other, but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous in the world to come. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that God created on Genesis day."

I have often wondered what it was about Rembrandt's paintings that so enthralled the Rav. Rembrandt lived in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam, knew Jews and painted them, as well as painting many biblical scenes, though the closeness or otherwise of his connection with Jews has been the subject of controversy. Rav Kook's admiration for the artist had, I suspect, nothing to do with this and everything to do with the light Rembrandt saw in the faces of ordinary people, without any attempt to beautify them. His work let us see the transcendental quality of the human, the only thing in the universe on which God set his image.

Art in Hebrew-omanut-has a semantic connection with emunah, "faith" or "faithfulness." A true artist is faithful both to his materials and to the task, teaching us: "To see a world in a grain of sand, / And a heaven in a wild flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, / And eternity in an hour."

The name Bezalel means, "in the shadow of God." Art is the shadow cast by the radiance of God that suffuses all things: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil."

And as Goethe said: "Where there is much light, the shadow is deep." When art lets us see the wonder of creation as God's work and the human person as God's image, it becomes a powerful part of the religious life, with one proviso. The Greeks believed in the holiness of beauty. Jews believe in hadrat kodesh, the beauty of holiness: not art for art's sake but art as a disclosure of the ultimate artistry of the Creator. That is how omanut enhances emunah, how art adds wonder to faith.

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Torah Lights

“**A**nd Moses assembled [vayakhel] all of the congregation of the children of Israel and said unto them: ...Six days shall work be done, but

the seventh day shall be for you, a day of complete rest for the Lord.” (Exodus 35:1–2) The portion of Vayakhel opens with the command to keep the Sabbath. This raises once again that fundamental question of the very strange order of the last five portions of the book of Exodus: Sanctuary – Sabbath – golden calf – Sabbath – Sanctuary.

Thus the Torah commands us first to create a Sanctuary, to establish a center of the sacred, which is after all the purpose and ideal of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But the sacred can easily be profaned – as history in modern life can testify – with holy wars, Iranian Khomeini-ism and fanatical stone-throwing and book burning. Hence, in the middle of the construction of the Sanctuary (the first two portions, Teruma and Tetzaveh, are dedicated to the Sanctuary) comes the travesty of the golden calf (the portion of Ki Tisa), which serves as an eloquent warning to subsequent generations not to pervert, or idolify, the holy. It then becomes perfectly logical, or rather psychological, to now return and conclude with the positive message of the Sanctuary as the Torah does in its two concluding portions of Vayakhel and Pekudei. And the Sabbath is the beacon of light which teaches the essence of Judaism, preventing its perversion into a golden calf of idolatry.

The Sabbath is the most central pillar of our faith. It is no accident that the very first law which was given to the Israelites after the splitting of the Reed Sea – before the revelation at Sinai – was the Sabbath (Ex. 15:25; Rashi ad loc. citing Sanhedrin 56b), and the first law explained to a would-be convert (Jew by choice) is likewise the Sabbath (Yevamot 47). In all of my experience in attempting to expose Jews who have wandered far afield from their faith to the glories of their Jewish heritage, I have found that there is no more powerful introduction to returning to Judaism than the Sabbath experience.

And how does the Sabbath accomplish this? Certainly the delightful glow of the Sabbath candles, the warmth of the Kiddush wine, the familial and congenial togetherness of delectable Sabbath meals replete with angels of peace, praises to women, blessings of children, songs of holiness and words of Torah, all contribute to the creation of a special and unique day dedicated to physical relaxation, spiritual creativity and existential well-being.

But the Sabbath is more than that. It contains the essence of the Jewish ideal, the purpose for which we were chosen by God, and the mission which has the power to unite all of us in the pursuit of a common historic goal (vayakhel). The “oasis in time” evokes the three most seminal moments in Jewish history, three moments of past and future that more than any others serve to define our Jewish present. A description of these moments is to be found in each of three main Amidot (standing prayers) which are recited by observant Jews

every Sabbath. On Friday evening we evoke and re-experience the creation of the world (“And God completed the heavens and the earth and all their hosts...”), on Sabbath morning we evoke and re-experience the revelation of the law at Sinai (“Moses rejoiced with the gift of his portion...the two tablets of stone he brought down in his hands”), and on Sabbath afternoon we evoke and attempt to experience the redemption (“You are One and Your Name is One” – and the prophet Zekhariah teaches that only “.... on that day [of Messianic redemption and universal peace] will God be One and will His name be One”).

Creation, revelation and redemption are the three pillars which form the bedrock of the Jewish message and mission.

Creation reminds us that there is one omnipotent creator, and the entire world consists of His limited, but still exalted, creatures. The very creaturehood of all of humanity serves to unite all individuals in a bond of inescapable unity. The very fact that we share the same parent in heaven means that we are all of us siblings on earth: whites and blacks, Israelis and Palestinians. The corollary of God the Creator is God the Redeemer, God who will not allow any of His children to be enslaved by any of His other children. Hence the two versions of the Decalogue as well as the Kiddush prayer define the Sabbath as both a memorial to creation as well as a memorial to the Exodus from Egypt. And the Sabbath remains an eternal reminder that any expression of the sacred which does not include sensitivity to every human being and respect for the freedom and integrity of each of God’s children can only lead to the perversion of the golden calf idolatry.

Revelation reminds us that there can be no freedom without structure, no respect for self without taking into account the needs of others, no love without law. The Torah remains our God-given blueprint for the kind of meaningful and sacred lives which lead to more perfect families and societies. In this sense, Judaism is a revolutionary concept, an idea and lifestyle which will not rest until human nature is perfected and the world is redeemed. Thus the final Sabbath Amida evokes that longed-for period when the world will be redeemed as a result of the Torah, which has the power and the purpose to perfect the universe under the kingship of God, in effect to revolutionize society.

But the tragedy of most revolutions is that the leaders themselves usually lose sight of what it was that they fought for in the first place. Indeed, all too often the beneficiaries of the revolt are guilty of greater crimes of avarice and greed and despotism than were those against whom they rebelled. This was true of the Maccabean revolt, the French revolution, and the Communist revolution in our own time. Equality and fraternity were the sanctuaries of Voltaire and Lenin; the blood baths of Robespierre and Stalin became their golden calf perversion.

The genius of Judaism lies in its ability to maintain the future ideal as an ever-present reality of our daily lives. In this way we can never forget what we are striving to accomplish, nor can we allow ourselves to become cynically disillusioned as to the possibility of our attaining it. Hence each workaday week of frustration and sadness is climaxed by a Sabbath – a taste of the World to Come, a glimpse into the longed-for period of peace and harmony. Each Sabbath reminds us of the pure taste of the Sanctuary, and prevents us from descending into the depths of golden-calf materialism and idolatry.

The story is told of a Hassidic rebbe who always rejoiced mightily upon sharing the Sabbath meals with his congregant-disciples. People who were bent over with burden and toil each week, whose brows were creased with anxiety and whose eyes were clouded with worry, would become almost miraculously transformed into tall and clear-eyed princes and princesses with their new-found freedom and faith at the advent of Shabbat. But alas, the picture would change during the “third meal” late on Shabbat afternoon. As the sun would begin to set, the songs would become somber and the mundane concerns would return to haunt the faces and backs of the Jews who were forced to return to reality. And the rebbe would look heavenwards and beseech: “How long, dear Father? Can you not redeem us now!?”

But at one particular Sabbath “third meal,” the rebbe’s eyes became animated with a strange glow. He banged on the table, crying out: “I have it, my beloved disciples. We shall force God’s hand, wage a rebellion against Heaven. We will bring about the redemption – now. The plan is breathtakingly simple. We will not recite the havdala [the prayer of “separation” which concludes the Sabbath and begins the week]. If the Sabbath never ends, redemption never ends. If there is no havdala, we will never have to return to the weekday world.”

The Hassidim were entranced. They danced and sang joyous tunes long past the appearance of three stars, long past the conclusion of the Sabbath in other congregations. But then their wives began looking for them; after all, the children had to be fed and bathed, clothes had to be washed, food had to be cooked. One by one each disciple embarrassedly returned to his family, leaving the rebbe as the lone revolutionary – until the rebbe’s rebbetzin entered the scene, complaining that the week had to begin, for there was much necessary work to do.

With tears coursing down his cheeks, the defeated rebbe made havdala. A voice then came down from heaven: “Redemption shall come, and the world will experience a never-ending Sabbath. But this cannot occur until all of Israel really wants to be redeemed, really works to be redeemed, and until every Jew internalizes the message of the Sabbath and reaches out to every human being, making each day a Sabbath, creating a new world order, an eternal period of peace

and love." *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. © 2024 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

One of the main questions raised by the commentators to this week's parsha is why the Torah again discusses the prohibitions of the Sabbath. The Torah has done so in the previous parshiyot of Shemot, so one might question this seemingly unwarranted repetition. In their comments, I feel one of the ideas presented to be especially relevant to our world. We do not find that at the time of creation, the Torah sanctified any given place or location on the face of the earth. The entire idea of the uniqueness of the Land of Israel does not appear in the Torah until the time of our father Abraham. And there it appears as a promise of a homeland to Abraham's descendants without any mention of holiness or sanctification.

Holiness only appears regarding a place and location in the story of our father Jacob and his heavenly dream at Beit El. Already in the first section of the Bible, in the story of creation itself, we read that the Lord sanctified time. "Therefore, did the Lord bless the seventh day and sanctify it." Time is the holiest of all factors in human life. It is the one thing that, since creation, has been blessed, sanctified, and made very special. It is no wonder that the holiness of the Sabbath is emphasized in the Torah. In human behavior and thought, time is as important as wealth or location or the accomplishment of any human deeds. The Torah comes to warn us not to succumb to such a viewpoint or behavior pattern.

The holy Tabernacle, according to most commentators, was ordered and built after Israel sinned in the desert by worshiping the golden calf. These commentators saw this Tabernacle as an accommodation, so to speak, of Heaven to the human condition. People somehow require a tangible place of worship, a holiness of space and locality, something solid that can represent to them the invisible and eternal. The Tabernacle, in a sense, came to replace the necessity for a golden calf created by human beings.

The Lord gave Israel detailed instructions how this Tabernacle and its artifacts should be constructed and designed. Even though holiness of space, location and of actual structure is necessary for human service of God, it must be done solely under God's conditions. There can be many designs to build a golden calf. To build a Tabernacle to God there can only be one ordained holy design and plan. Even when building a Tabernacle according to God's plan, the Jewish people were instructed and inspired to remember that holiness of time is always greater than holiness of place and of

structure.

The Sabbath, which has accompanied us from the time of creation, takes precedence over all else except for human life itself. The Tabernacle and its succeeding Temples were all temporary and subject to the events of time. Even the holy Land of Israel disappeared from Jewish history for millennia. But the Sabbath never stopped accompanying the Jews wherever they lived and under whatever the circumstances. And this is why this lesson is drummed into us in the narrative of the Torah. How pertinent this lesson is in our time and in our environment. © 2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Rabbi Yehudah Halevi suggests that in the sin of the golden calf, "The people did not intend to give up their allegiance to God" in violation of the first of the Ten Declarations. Rather, they wanted to create a physical figure representative of God, thus violating the third of the Ten Declarations, which prohibits the making of a graven image (Exodus 20:4, Kuzari 1:97).

But the mainstream opinion is that, in building the golden calf, the Jews violated the first of the commandments. At Sinai, Am Yisrael (the Jewish People) were introduced to the concept of pure monotheism, belief in the One God, with no intermediary between the human being and the Almighty. The role of Moses was that of the prophet of prophets, but he was in no way a divine being.

When Am Yisrael thought Moses would not descend from Mount Sinai, they assumed that the model of pure monotheism would be replaced by a system of advanced polytheism, i.e., belief in a god with multiple sub-deities. Having emerged from Egypt, where animals were venerated as gods, Am Yisrael concluded that the golden calf would be an appropriate mini-god.

For this reason, argues Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk in his Meshech Chochmah, Moses broke the tablets. At first blush, this seems to be a sacrilegious act. But Moses feared that if he only destroyed the golden calf and not the tablets, perhaps the people would conclude that the tablets were sub-deities.

In the words of Rabbi Meir Simcha quoted by Nehama Leibowitz: There is nothing intrinsically holy in the world, save the Holy One, blessed be He, to Whom alone reverence, praise, and homage is due.... Now we may understand why Moses, upon perceiving the physical and mental state of the people, promptly broke the tablets. He feared they would deify them as they had done the calf. Had he brought [the tablets] intact, they would have substituted them for the calf and not reformed their ways.

A core belief of Judaism is that there is only One God. As we recite in the Yigdal prayer summarizing Maimonides's Thirteen Principles of Faith, "He is One – and there is no unity like His Oneness." ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Spinning Wool

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Spinning wool is one of the thirty nine labors that one is forbidden to do on Shabbat. It is actually one of the labors that are explicitly mentioned in the Torah. "Every wise hearted woman spun with her hands" and "All the women whose hearts inspired them with wisdom spun the goat hair" (Exodus 35:25,26) The essence of this labor is the gathering of small amounts of wool or cotton with one's finger tips or with a spindle to form thread. The derivation (toldah) of this labor according to one view is the forming of braids of dough and creating them into Challah.

The spinning in the Tabernacle was very special in that the wool was spun while it was still attached to the goat before the goat was sheared. Only the women who had such special wisdom were able to accomplish this; among ordinary people, this knowledge was not known. Thus anyone who would perform this labor on Shabbat, (as these women did) would not be transgressing since it is not the normal way of spinning wool.

Why did the women spin the wool this way? Some point out the zeal of these women to fulfill the Mitzva even before the animal was sheared while others say that they did this to prevent defilement for we know that the wool can never be defiled (Taamei) while it is attached to a living thing.

Another fascinating interpretation is advanced by Rav Yechiel Michal from AustroBiza who posits that since spinning as these women did is permitted on the Shabbat (as stated above) then the work of the Tabernacle became transformed to a Mitzva that is not bound by time, such, that women are also obligated to do. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Kindling Fire and Shabbat

Parashat Vayakhel deals with the building of the various parts of the Mishkan, the Temple in the desert. Prior to the actual building, one specific warning is given to the people even though this was discussed in several places in the Torah that preceded this section. The warning here concerned work on Shabbat, specifically warning against kindling fire on Shabbat.

The Torah states: "And Moshe assembled the entire assembly of the B'nei Yisrael and said to them,

"These are the things that Hashem commanded to do them: For a period of six days, work may be done, but the seventh day shall be holy for you, a day of complete rest for Hashem; whoever does work on it shall be put to death. You shall not light fire in any of your dwellings on the Shabbat day." The last sentence in this section has caused much debate over the centuries and is the subject of our discussion.

Rashi comments about this sentence: "There are those among our Rabbis who say that kindling a fire went out of its general category to teach a negative commandment (lav), and there are those who say that it went out to divide (l'chalek)." Without understanding the principles of analysis that apply to the study of Torah, this comment is impossible to comprehend. One of these principles is a general category followed by a specific part of that category (klal uprat). Here we have a general category, "For a period of six days, work may be done, but the seventh day shall be holy for you, a day of complete rest for Hashem; whoever does work on it shall be put to death." No specific types of work are mentioned in this general category. But this sentence is followed by a specific work within that general category, "You shall not light fire in any of your dwellings on the Shabbat day," singling out that one type of work from the general category. One possible reason for separating kindling of fire from the general category of work is to teach that the law of kindling is different than the other prohibitions of Shabbat. If one is guilty of breaking a prohibition of Shabbat on purpose, if there are witnesses, the punishment is death; but if there are no witnesses, the punishment is "karet," being cut off from the people. This matches the principle of study that says, "anything that was included in a general statement, but was then singled out to discuss a provision similar to the general category, has been singled out to be more lenient than more severe."

In contrast, if kindling was singled out to teach us something about the general category of work on Shabbat, it indicates that it was not taken out to teach us only about kindling, but about each specific prohibition within the general prohibition of work. This matches the principle of analysis which says, "anything that was included in a general statement, but was then singled out from the general statement in order to teach something, was not singled out to teach only about itself, but to apply its teaching to the entire generality." In this case, we learn that kindling is a unique form of work and carries a distinct punishment. But it also teaches that each specific form of work is considered unique. Therefore, if one transgressed two specific prohibitions within the general category, one could be punished for each one separately.

The Oral Law given to Moshe on Har Sinai defined "malacha, types of work forbidden on Shabbat," as any work that was related to the building of the Mishkan, the Temple. These were broken down into

thirty-nine major categories (Avot) and numerous sub-categories (Toladot). HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin asks why, of all the work that is forbidden on Shabbat, the kindling of fire was singled out for the example of work that fit either the characteristic of lav, a negative, or cheilek, to divide. For those who wish to say that it was singled out to teach a negative commandment lav, (Rav Yosi), kindling of fire is compared to blowing shofar and saving bread that had accidentally been left in the oven after Shabbat had begun. What permits shofar and removal of bread from the oven is that these acts are considered a skill rather than just a normal form of work. The production of fire was also considered a special skill given to the first Man by Hashem which enabled him to produce all the necessary tools for his survival. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that “the special mention of kindling in this verse out of all the other “malachot,” is to tell us that it is only a lav, that kindling fire on Shabbat is forbidden by the Torah but it does not that which would incur the penalty of death.”

HaRav Sorotzkin explains that for those (Rav Natan) who wish to say that kindling fire was singled out to separate (l'chalek) as the quintessential example of malacha, kindling fire was separated because it was the first act of many of the other forms of work, as they could not be accomplished without first kindling fire. As an example, boiling water or dyes, a malacha forbidden on Shabbat, cannot happen without first kindling fire. Therefore, it was necessary to teach that kindling fire was a separate malacha, and even though it is an essential prerequisite part of the action of boiling water or dyes, it must be treated as a separate lav, and the two combined actions are treated as two separate transgressions. HaRav Hirsch explains that this comes to teach about all of the malachot on Shabbat; that if one accidentally transgresses several different categories of malacha on Shabbat (perhaps, by not realizing that it was Shabbat), one must atone separately for each category of transgression.

The Ramban explains Rav Natan's position slightly differently. Rav Natan did not need this verse about kindling fire to prohibit baking, cooking, boiling, or the preparation of food, as these were forbidden in other verses in the Torah. “Yet I might think that all activities which benefit man in such a way that the benefit is only to the body – such as lighting a candle, making fire, or washing one's whole body in hot water – should be allowed, for these are part of the delight of Shabbat. Therefore, it says, ‘You shall not light a fire,’ to prohibit all [mentioned activities even if done for these purposes].”

This week's lesson is two-fold. The text is important in its message, and the process is equally important. Our Rabbis have explained the way in which we must approach sentences within the Torah to gain the proper understanding of the Law. We recite this set of approaches every day in the morning prayers (Rabi

Yishmael omer). We also have seen how a section of a sentence can be understood in more than one way using a different process from this same set of approaches. The Torah is not a simple compilation of Laws but a myriad of nuances all derived from this one set of approaches. The more one studies Torah together with the Talmud, the more one can comprehend the depth of our Torah. ©2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Any man and woman whose hearts inspired them to bring... so brought the children of Israel a donation to Hashem." (Shmos 35:29) The Parsha goes into great detail about how the Jews responded to the call for building the Mishkan. Certainly, this was a moment where our people shone and deserved the spotlight. People were quick not only to donate money or items, but to work and produce what was needed. It happened so quickly that they covered the budget and got all they needed while people were still preparing to bring more!

Over the course of a number of pesukim, we are told that there were men who did such-and-such, and men who brought this or that. Then we are told that women brought certain things, while other women did intricate work for the Mishkan. It seems to delineate the various offerings by who was bringing them, praising the men and women separately for what they did.

In this posuk, however, the Torah combines men and women in a single statement of what they did. Why, now, does the Torah change and put them together? If it planned to do this, why make the other verses gender-specific?

Perhaps we can suggest that initially, the Torah outlined the various gifts each person brought based on their situation. Some were things men could offer, while others were things women could offer, and still others were things that only select individuals could offer. The diversity of the population enabled them to offer different things that would work together to complete the whole project. No one was able to take credit for doing more than anyone else, because each person had their own part to do.

However, our posuk is different. It speaks of the one thing that everyone can and should do equally. This verse, explains the Malbim, teaches us that the donations the people brought were not the main things Hashem appreciated. Instead, Hashem wants our hearts. It could very well be that some people brought nothing, but were included here.

A poor person who had nothing to donate, but felt in his heart and mind that he wanted to; that if he had the wherewithal, he would sponsor the entire Mishkan and all its vessels, such a person – man or woman – was giving Hashem exactly what He wanted. The donation Hashem seeks from us is our desire to be close to Him

and to do good things. Whether we are able to bring them to fruition or not is irrelevant.

The person who brought nothing but wished he could, was more pleasing in Hashem's eyes than those who donated because it looked good to their neighbors, or because "everyone is doing it." Such devotion and dedication knows no bounds and is universally approachable for any of us. Nothing can stop us from wanting to give, and this is the only thing Hashem can't provide Himself.

R' Paysach Krohn became a Mohel (ritual circumciser) at a young age and found it difficult at first to find work. Trying to support his widowed mother and orphaned siblings at the age of 21, he felt the strain of people not trusting his abilities because of his youth.

One day, a man approached him and said, "My wife is expecting. When she has a baby, YOU'RE going to do the bris!" R' Paysach got tremendous chizuk and encouragement from this and was able to push on and find opportunities to perform brissim.

A few months later, the fellow had a baby - a girl! R' Paysach was still grateful for the confidence the fellow had placed in him. He would later call it, "The greatest bris I never performed." © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YOCHANAN ZWEIG

A Golden Opportunity

“**T**hese are the things that Hashem commanded, to do them”(35:1) Moshe assembles the entire nation and charges them with the thirty-nine categories of labor prohibited on the Shabbos day. From the words that introduce the commandment to observe the Shabbos, "eileh hadevarim asher tziva Hashem" -- "these are the things Hashem commanded", the Talmud derives an allusion to the thirty-nine categories of labor, the numerical value of "eileh" being thirty-nine. (Yerushalmi Shabbos 87:5) The remaining portion of the verse seems awkward. Referring to the directive that Hashem has commanded, the verse states "la'asos osam" -- "to do them". If Shabbos is a day of curtailed activity, why are the Shabbos restrictions defined as an act of doing? Concerning no other directive do we encounter Moshe addressing the nation as an assembly, a "kahal". Why is it necessary to do so for the mitzva of Shabbos? Why is this mitzva juxtaposed to the sin of the Golden Calf? The Midrash relates that at this gathering Moshe institutes the ordinance that every community is required to provide communal study of the Shabbos laws on the Shabbos. (Yalkut) What is the rationale for this ordinance? Why must it specifically be communal studying? Why must the study be particularly of the Shabbos laws?

The effect of observing a mitzva is primarily relegated to the individual performing it. The individual's performance of a mitzva has a negligible impact upon the community; one person keeping kosher does not

impact upon the community's observance of the dietary laws. The reverse is true as well; the community's observance of kashrus does not affect the individual's observance of the same precept. Shabbos observance is the exception to this rule. An individual who observes the Shabbos surrounded by others who do not, has a very different experience than one who is surrounded by an observant community. Through his Shabbos observance, each individual within a community helps create the Shabbos environment which enhances every member of the community's Shabbos experience. Conversely, the individual desecration of the Shabbos has an adverse effect upon the entire community. The obligation to observe the Shabbos requires a person to create a Shabbos environment. Therefore, the verse states "la'asos osam" -- "to do them"; Moshe is instructing the Jewish community to create the Shabbos. (In Yiddish, a language which is replete with expressions that offer valuable insights into the Jewish psyche and religion, there is a saying "yeder eine macht Shabbos far zich alein" -- "each person is making Shabbos for himself". This idiom is used to describe people who are concerned only with their own well-being and not with the well-being of others.)

The sin of the Golden Calf was a result of the human need to connect to a tangible and concrete object. It is difficult for man to perceive an entity that he cannot see or touch. Therefore, man has a need for symbols which he attaches himself to and with which he can identify. Regardless of how removed a person is from Jewish observance, lighting Chanukah candles or sitting at a Pesach Seder will always be vestiges of his observance, for they are symbols through which a person feels connected.

When Moshe is in Bnei Yisroel's midst they feel connected to Hashem through him. Fearing that he died, Bnei Yisroel require a substitute through which they can once again feel connected to Hashem. The Golden Calf is this substitute.

Another symbol which is critical in enabling a person to sense his connection is his environment. After the sin of the Golden Calf Hashem instructs Moshe to teach Bnei Yisroel how to create a permissible symbol through which they can feel closer to Him. Shabbos is the precept which attests to Hashem being the Creator of the Universe and His ongoing involvement in the maintenance of the world. Participating in the creation of the Shabbos environment allows each individual to feel connected to one another and to Hashem.

Many of the requirements of Shabbos are designated to establish the necessary atmosphere for creating the Shabbos environment, the candles, special clothing, and delicacies being but a few examples. Moshe's instituting communal study of the laws of Shabbos is intended to assist in the creation of the Shabbos environment. Having the entire community come together and study the subtleties and nuances of

Shabbos observance effectively enhances the Shabbos atmosphere.

Moshe gathers Bnei Yisroel together as a community after the sin of the Golden Calf to teach them how to create a tangible relationship with Hashem. Celebrating the Shabbos on a communal level is the most effective manner to establish the symbol through which we can connect to our Creator. ©2024 Rabbi Y. Zweig and torah.org

RABBI AVROHOM LEVENTHAL

Fueled by Fire

There is a well-known parable that explains the relationship of thought to deed. Deeds are vehicles that can bring ideas and concepts from “Point A to Point B”, like a car, train or boat. Thoughts are what power those deeds, similar to fuel, coal or wind. When one has deeds without thought the vehicle cannot be properly powered. Thoughts without deed, however, are simply gas and a lot of hot air.

The mitzva to bring the half-shekel coin, as mentioned in Parshat Shekalim, is the balance of thought and deed.

זֶהוּ יִתְנוּ כָּל־הַעֲבָרִי עַל־הַפְּקֻדִים מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל. "הַקֹּדֶשׁ." - "everyone passing by to be counted must give this—half a shekel based on the shekel of the Holy" (Shmot 30:13)

Moshe, uncertain of the commandment, asked HaShem to which coin He was referring.

The Midrash narrates His answer to Moshe:

אָמַר רַבִּי מֵאִיר נִטְלַת הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא כְּמִין מִטְבַּע שֶׁל אִשׁ מִתַּחַת אֲמַר רַבִּי מֵאִיר נִטְלַת הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא כְּמִין מִטְבַּע שֶׁל אִשׁ מִתַּחַת. כִּסָּא הַכְּבוֹד וְהִרְאָה לּוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה זָה יִתְנוּ, קִזָּה יִתְנוּ. "Rav Meir said: HaShem took a coin of fire from beneath the Throne of Glory and showed it to Moshe. This they should give. Like this they should give" (Bamidbar Rabba 12: 3)

The “burning” questions of Moshe were: Why was it shown made of fire, why from under the Throne and why only a half-shekel and not a whole one?

In his work Midbar Shur, Rav Kook explains that the requirement of a half-shekel is the expression of unity of the Jewish people. Each person, regardless of status, was to bring the same “half” coin. None of us are “whole” and only as a nation can we be complete. The “missing” half shekel, explains Rav Kook, represents thought. The fire is the burning desire for consideration of others, Ahavat Yisrael, which goes in tandem with our physical deeds. The source of our this is the Throne of Glory, from where emanates the collective soul of the Jewish people.

Thus, G-d shows Moshe that unity occurs through deeds performed for others, powered by a communal thought/responsibility and rooted in the common bond of our souls.

And where did those half-shekel coins go? They were made into the “adanim”, the small braces that joined the wall beams. While not easily seen, these braces were what held the Mishkan together. Without the adanim, the Mishkan couldn't stand. The other half-

shekel funded the communal sacrifices, our connection to G-d.

The very foundations of the Mishkan, both physical and spiritual, had to come from a half coin, given equally by everyone, thus unifying the nation in thought and deed.

Today, the custom of giving of the “half-shekel” coin is purely symbolic in order to recall the mitzva (we should soon see its return). The purpose of the half-shekel, however is still relevant today and forever.

If G-d simply wanted to raise the money for communal expenses, He would have had Moshe make a “General Campaign” and everyone would give as they see fit, as with the other contributions for the Mishkan. The wealthy could give more, the less fortunate not as much. While extremely important to the “cause”, such an appeal would not set the foundation for giving. G-d wanted us to understand that communal responsibility and deed is a great equalizer and offers everyone the opportunity to participate.

The “half-shekel” levels the playing field with a relatively small obligation. As Rav Kook explains, in our deeds it is not only what we can see or touch that matters. It's that half-shekel of “fire”, our thoughts and intentions, not necessarily tangible, combined with actions, that compose true kindness.

What are our goals when giving charity or helping others?

Does our donation carry the expectation of recognition or reward? Are we helping someone in need to make them better or just to make ourselves feel good? How altruistic are we? Will our contributions unify us with others or elevate our status above another who may not be able to do the same?

The half shekel sets the standard. It created the foundation that unified the nation through the physical components of the Mishkan as well as the spiritual sacrifices. A perfect combination of thought and deed.

Our giving must be in practice and with consideration. It's not only about what we are doing in action but also the thought and desire to truly make things better for everyone else. ©2022 Rabbi A. Leventhal, noted educator and speaker, is the Executive Director at Lema'an Achai lemaanachai.org

