

PARASHAT VAYAK'HEL



אור ואש Light and Fire

As Parashat Vayak'hel begins, Moshe descends from Mount Sinai, carrying the second Tablets of the Law – very similar to the ones he shattered during the Sin of the Golden Calf nearly three months earlier. Immediately upon arrival in the camp of Israel, he convenes the nation and begins teaching them the details of their next task: The construction of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and its utensils.

וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל עֵדֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם,
אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֲתֶם.

*Moshe gathered the entire congregation of Israel and said to them:
“These are the things that G-d has commanded to do.”* (Sh'mot 35,1)

One would expect that Moshe would then begin teaching the details of building the Mishkan, the place in which the Holy Divine Presence is to dwell within Israel. Yet instead, he starts with the commandment of the Sabbath:

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִהְיֶה לָּכֶם קֹדֶשׁ שַׁבָּת שַׁבָּתוֹן לָהּ...
לֹא תִבְעֲרוּ אֵשׁ בְּכָל מִשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת.

*Six days a week, work shall be done - but the seventh day shall
be sacred for you, a Sabbath of Sabbaths for G-d... Do not
kindle fires in all your dwellings on the Sabbath.* (verses 2-3)

This introduction raises two questions. First of all, what message was Moshe trying to give over by beginning his lesson with the Sabbath day and its holiness? Second, out of the 39 categories of prohibited work on the

Sabbath, why did Moshe choose “lighting fire” for his example of prohibited work on the holy day?

It would seem that by starting off with Shabbat, Moshe Rabbeinu was teaching Israel that the Sabbath sanctity is greater and more important than the construction of the Mishkan. Moshe assumed that the people would be very enthused about building the Tabernacle, and that they all would want to be partners in this holy project. He was correct, of course; everyone donated what they could for the Mishkan, whether it was silver, gold, or their skills and wisdom. Moshe therefore wanted to make it quite clear that all these activities must stop on the Sabbath day.

And why did he specifically mention “lighting fire?” We can assume that fire is critical for many aspects of the Mishkan, such as working with the precious metals, preparing the colors and dyes for the materials, and more. He is about to teach Israel the details of constructing the Mishkan, as he was taught in Terumah and Tetzaveh, and he therefore specifies an activity that is very prevalent throughout the process.

But let us allow these questions to further challenge us to seek and discover new depths.

■ Serving Hashem

In the preceding Torah portion, Ki Tisa, Moshe has completed forty days and nights atop Mt. Sinai learning Torah from G-d, including every detail of the construction of the Mishkan. Just before he receives the first set of Tablets of the Law, Hashem gives him a special gift for Israel: the mitzvah of the holy Sabbath day. Moshe’s private 40-day meeting with Hashem ends with this:

וַאֲתָהּ דִּבֶּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר: אַךְ אֵת שַׁבָּתֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ
כִּי אוֹת הוּא בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם לְדַעַת כִּי אֲנִי ה' מְקַדְּשְׁכֶם.

Speak to the Children of Israel, saying:

*“Keep My Sabbaths, for it is a sign between Me and you
for your generations, to know that I am G-d Who
has sanctified you.” (31,13)*

When Moshe then comes down from the mountain with the covenantal Tablets in his hands, he assembles the nation and begins with the last thing he learned: the Sabbath. We can say that this holy instance of LIFO - Last In, First Out - is another answer to our first question above. But there is yet a deeper message here.

We know that the Nation of Israel became accustomed to idol worship during the long period they lived in ancient Egypt. Idol worship is the drawing and sculpting and forming of “gods,” using real substances and materials that can be both seen and touched. When Bnei Yisrael began re-connecting with the G-d of their Forefathers as He revealed His presence and strength via the Ten Plagues, they underwent a genuine soul revolution. They made the switch from seeking out many physical gods, to the service of the One G-d – invisible and untouchable.

However, though Bnei Yisrael agreed to worship only Hashem, they still longed to do so in the manner to which they had become accustomed. They needed something they could see and touch, something concrete to which they could direct their thoughts and desires. It was the Mishkan, with its golden *cherubim*, candelabra, and other very real and tangible utensils, that fulfilled this need.

It is important to emphasize in this connection that together with the detailed instructions for planning and building the Mishkan, Hashem also gave strict orders forbidding even the slightest changes in the making of the utensils. We will explain the significance of this below.

Moshe Rabbeinu remained on the mountain a few hours later than Bnei Yisrael expected him, leading to an eruption of frustration and negativity among some of the impatient nation. They had waited for him for forty days! They approached Moshe’s brother Aharon the Priest with this request/demand:

קום עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ,
כִּי זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה הָיָה לוֹ.

Arise, make us a god that will lead us, for this man Moshe who took us out of Egypt – we don’t know what has become of him. (32,1)

Moshe descends from the mountain, ready to give Israel the Tablets of the holy Torah, and finds a most difficult and painful situation: idol worship and merry-making round a golden calf down below. In his wrath, he smashes the tablets to the ground. He must later ascend the mountain once again in order to replace them – and when he again comes down, as recounted in the beginning of Parashat Vayak’hel, he bears the following very important message for the people.

“It’s true,” Moshe says, “that the Mishkan and the future Holy Temple are Holy of Holies; it is there that Hashem’s presence and light dwell amongst

the people, and divine fire descends from the sky to that holy divine abode. But this is not the only way of serving G-d. There is an even more exalted, more pure, and more perfect way of doing so, and that is via the Sabbath day – a day of worship of G-d with pure and unsullied thoughts, a day of great spiritual uplifting as we unite and connect with our Creator. Our service of G-d in the Mishkan is one of actions, with our hands, while our Sabbath worship is precisely the opposite: by **not acting**. It is a day exclusively for thoughts and spiritual inspiration and uplifting.”

We thus see that there are two parallel paths – active and passive – via which G-d's light and glory can appear in the world:

Path 1: Building a Mishkan and Holy Temple for G-d's presence, via the 39 types of work. We will see that these are grounded in fire – and G-d's presence rests upon the Mishkan via fire, as written: *“A continuous fire shall burn upon the altar; it shall not go out.”* (Vayikra 6,6)

Path 2: Refraining from fire and the 39 types of work on the Sabbath. In this path, the Divine presence rests upon the entire world on the Sabbath not by fire, but via light alone, as we will see below. As is written: וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, *“He rested on the seventh day”* (Sh'mot 20,11); the word for *“rested”* is understood as in the verse נָחָה רוּחַ אֱלֹהֵינוּ עַל אֶלְיָשָׁע, *“the spirit of Eliyahu [has] rested upon Elisha.”* (Kings II 2,15)

Hashem Himself also worked in two parallel ways: He both created the physical world, and rested on the seventh day. Both are vital: The greatness of the Sabbath and its “passive” Divine worship is that it cannot lead to idol worship, such as occurred at the Sin of the Golden Calf; the greatness of the Mishkan lies in the subjugation to Hashem of the physical realm, and in the guidance of man's imagination toward the service of G-d. This latter is the essence of the creation of the material world.

This principle – that the Sabbath and the Mishkan represent parallel routes for Divine worship – is the guide for determining the forbidden types of work on the Sabbath. Any act that is significant for the construction of the Mishkan is precisely that which is forbidden on Shabbat.

One might ask: If the Sabbath is marked by its “passivity,” what is meant by that which is said in Parashat Ki Tisa (Sh'mot 31,16), *“to make the Sabbath”*? – The answer is that must it be read in context: *“to make the Sabbath for [Israel's] generations an everlasting covenant”* - that is, it must be made into an everlasting covenant.

■ Do Not Kindle Fires

This brings us once again to the second question we asked above: Of the 39 categories of prohibited work on the Sabbath, why did Moshe specifically choose to mention only that of “lighting fire” when he came down from Sinai? Why does this one represent the others?

Rav Levi Nachmani, of saintly blessed memory, taught that when we look carefully at the physical reality around us, we will see that it is fire in its various forms that represents man’s use of energy on Earth. Cars’ combustion engines, turbines, electricity production, airplanes, trains, construction, industry – everything revolves around fire. All of our military capabilities, of course, with both conventional and non-conventional weapons, are based on explosions of gunpowder or uranium’s atomic nucleus.

Our Sages taught that fire was first formed by Adam, the first man, when he rubbed two stones together – and that this occurred on Motzaei Shabbat, the conclusion of the first Sabbath. Why precisely then? Because the Sabbath day represents Divine **Light**: the light of prophecy, the light of blessing, the light of sanctity, the light of joy, the light of love, the light of redemption and salvation. When the Sabbath day departs and is replaced by a weekday, the **light** disappears, and in its place comes **fire**, representing the energy at man’s disposal.

The Torah states: *G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it* (B’reshit 2,3). On this verse, the Medrash B’reshit Rabba (11,2) comments regarding the special Sabbath light:

G-d both blessed and sanctified the Sabbath day using the light of man’s countenance (face). The light of one’s face during the week is not the same as the light of one’s face on the Sabbath day.

That is, the light of one’s face - happiness, broad-mindedness, and full-heartedness – is “turned off” during the week. We can now understand why the Torah emphasizes, *“Do not kindle fires in all your dwellings on the Sabbath”* (Sh’mot 35,3). Bnei Yisrael are cautioned not to exchange the exalted Divine light of the Sabbath for the low-grade, physical fire-energy that is the basis for our actions during the week.

The light on Sabbath is a unique one, bearing G-dly inspiration from above. When we say that Holy One “rested” on the Sabbath day, we mean

that He placed His Presence in and around the world. This is why one of our Saturday night *havdalah* blessings is *borei me'orei ha-esh*, “He Who creates the lights of the fire.” It refers to the “changing of the guard,” the replacement of the spiritual fire with work-a-day fire that will serve us for the next six days.

There is fire in the Holy Temple, as well. The fire upon the altar is a necessary pre-condition for the appearance of the Divine fire that descends from above. But we must also beware of the danger that this fire could possibly be one that leads to idol worship – as happened in the Sin of the Golden Calf:

... וְאֵשׁ לָכֹהֵן בָּאֵשׁ וַיִּצֵא הָעֵגֶל הַזֶּה.

[Aharon said:] “I threw it into the fire,
and this calf emerged.” (Sh'mot 32,24)

Only with the light of joy and *ruach hakodesh* (Divine inspiration), is there no real danger that idol-worship can result.

■ Carrying from One Domain to Another

Bnei Yisrael were overly generous in donating to the Mishkan:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר,

מְרֻבִּים הָעָם לְהִבְיֵא, מִדֵּי הָעֵבֶדָה לְמַלְאכָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ.

[The wise men] said to Moshe: “The nation is bringing too much, more than needed for the work G-d commanded.” (36,5)

Moshe thereupon orders an end to collection activities:

וַיִּצַו מֹשֶׁה וַיַּעֲבִירוּ קוֹל בְּמַחֲנֵה לֵאמֹר:

אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אַל יַעֲשׂוּ עוֹד מְלָאכָה לְתִרוּמַת הַקֹּדֶשׁ, וַיִּכְלֵא הָעָם מִהִבְיֵא.

Moshe gave the command and they transmitted it in the camp, saying: “Neither man nor woman shall do any more work in donating to the holiness” - and they stopped bringing. (verse 6)

The verses are clear: The artisans feel that no further contributions are needed, as there is more than enough. But the Sages of the Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi) saw another, hidden meaning in this text. In the beginning of Tractate Shabbat, they cite this verse to teach that carrying an item from a private domain to a public domain, or vice versa, is a forbidden work activity on the Sabbath. How is this law derived from this passage?

The explanation is that Moshe used the word *work*, *m'lakhah*: אֶל יַעֲשׂוּ עוֹד מְלָאכָה, *they should not do any more work*. The immediate result was *they stopped bringing* – showing that this very activity of carrying from domain to domain is categorized as a *m'lakhah*, a forbidden work activity. Essentially, this Yerushalmi is telling us that the Torah considers the construction work on the Mishkan to have begun way back from when a donation was brought from the donor's tent to the Mishkan area. Even this initial activity, therefore, qualifies as a forbidden work activity on the Sabbath.

The Torah emphasizes this again in the very next verse:

וְהַמְּלָאכָה הֵיְתָה דַּיִם לְכָל הַמְּלָאכָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ וְהוֹתֵר.
*The materials (lit., work) were enough for them
 for all the work to do, and more.* (verse 7)

As we can see, the formulation of this verse is slightly awkward. The meaning must be this: “The work of bringing the donations supplied the needs of the construction work on the Mishkan.” This is in fact how Rashi explains it in his commentary to the Torah.

But the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 96b) went further. It, too, derived from this passage that one may not carry from a private domain to a public domain on the Sabbath. Why does it depart from the plain meaning that Moshe was simply ordering a halt to all donations? Because of a hermeneutical rule called *g'zerah shavah*, in which a word used in two passages enables us to liken one passage to the other. In this case, the word וַיַּעֲבִירוּ, *they passed*, is used both here – “*they passed the sound [of the command] in the camp*” – and also in reference to Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year: תַּעֲבִירוּ שׁוֹפָר בְּכָל אֶרֶץְכֶם, “*Pass a shofar sound throughout your land*” (Vayikra 25,9). The Gemara then explains that just like the second verse is referring to a day of forbidden work - Yom Kippur - so too the prohibition here on carrying must be on that type of day: the Sabbath.

The Sages thus draw a connecting line between Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year and donations to the Mishkan. To understand what lies behind this link, we must look below the surface and try to understand why Moshe imposed such an absolute ban on further donations. Could he not have sufficed with an announcement that no additional contributions were needed?

The answer is that Moshe was here teaching the nation a 180-degree difference between idol worship and the service of G-d: The former is the

fruit of human imagination, and people are free to add or subtract from the rites at will. The service of Hashem, however, is precise and exact, according to the word of G-d; no more and no less. It is like a perfect melody, which cannot be changed by even one note.

This is why the exact measurements of the Mishkan are prescribed, as well as the precise weight of the gold that is used, and the exact number of hooks, etc. Nothing may be changed at all! In fact, when the Torah describes the process of building the Mishkan, it states no fewer than 18 times that all was done *בְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה*, *just as G-d had commanded Moshe*. Everything was precisely commanded, and no changes were permitted in the specifications of the Mishkan and its utensils. Similarly, no extra donations may be brought for this purpose.

But something is still not clear: Why can extra donations not be brought and used, not for the Mishkan, but for other purposes? Why not sell what is superfluous and use the proceeds for the maintenance of the Mishkan, or for preparing musical instruments for the Levites, or other such sacred purposes?

It must be that something else motivated Moshe's stern order against further donations. We recall the Gemara directing our attention to Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year, the ultimate year of return, about which the Torah tells us:

בְּשָׁנַת הַיּוֹבֵל הַזֹּאת תָּשׁוּבוּ אִישׁ אֶל אֲחֻזָּתוֹ.

In this Jubilee year, each man will return to his homestead. (Vayikra 25,13)

Everything in the Jubilee revolves around the concept of return to the source: freeing slaves and allowing them to return to their families, returning land to their previous owners, and, as we do every Shemittah year, returning the land's produce to Hashem by relinquishing ownership.

Yom Kippur, too, is a day of return and repentance - *teshuvah*, from the root meaning "to return." On this day we come home to our original purity, as it was before being enveloped in the impurity of sin.

How does this connect with the forbidden Sabbath work of carrying from domain to domain? We know that the construction activities in the Mishkan closely parallel the creation of the world, as the Medrash Rabba explains in detail (Bamidbar Rabba 12,13). The essence of Creation is G-d's resolve to grant decision-making authority – Free Will – to the mortals

He is about to create. They can even decide in opposition to Hashem's will. Thus, G-d willingly transfers His exclusive decision-making authority from His private domain to the public, human domain. As we read in Tehillim:

... וְהָאֵרֶץ נָתַן לְבְנֵי אָדָם.

... and the earth He gave to man. (Psalms 115,16)

But on the Sabbath, everything is gathered back to return to its source, just like on Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year, and Israel again crowns G-d the “exclusive King over the entire world.” This means to allow the *Keter*, the sphere of G-d's “crown” or His Supreme Will, to dictate events – as will be in the future:

... אַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים הֵּם נֶאֱמָר ה' נָתַתִּי אֶת תּוֹרָתִי בְּקִרְבָּם וְעַל לִבָּם אֶכְתְּבֶנָּה ...

After those days, G-d says, I will give My Torah within them and I will write it on their hearts. (Yirmiyahu 31,32)

There is a difference, though: In the future, evil will disappear from the world, as will Free Choice. But on the Sabbath, evil is still quite here, and only Israel crowns Hashem.

With the onset of the Sabbath each week, part of the public domain that was given to man returns to the private domain of the King of Kings, Master of All. This is a return to the source, just like on Yom Kippur of the Yovel year. Everything that was enclosed by a fence before the Sabbath is no longer in the public domain, but is rather a private domain. For us to remove items from a private to public domain on the Sabbath, or vice versa, is as if abandoning that which is good to the domain of the evil, or like introducing evil into the purity of sanctity.

As we say in the special Kedusha of the Sabbath Mussaf prayer:

*“They will give You, Hashem our G-d, a crown –
the angels on high together with Israel gathered below.”*

