

REMOVING OUR SOCIAL MASK

by Rabbi Dovid Green

We find a commandment in this week's Parsha to observe the Sabbath. It's worthwhile to understand what the Torah means when it conveys the expectation that we observe The Sabbath. Both in last week's and this week's parsha the subject is mentioned (Exodus 31:13-17, 35:2). Many people are puzzled by the many prohibitions involved in Sabbath observance. Many understand that Sabbath observance means not going to work, but that is incorrect. A person's work usually involves prohibited activities, but going to work is not what the Torah meant when it commanded us to abstain from working on the Sabbath.

When G-d instructed the Jews to build the Tabernacle, in the same breath, so to speak, He told them to be sure to observe the Sabbath. There is a very important reason for the juxtaposition of these commandments. Even though the Tabernacle is for such a lofty purpose, namely, to bring the divine presence into this world, it was forbidden to build it on the Sabbath. From here we learn the definition of work which the Torah prohibits. The Hebrew word for Sabbath Prohibitions is "melacha." The same word is used in regard to the labors done in the building of the Tabernacle. When the Torah states not to do "melacha," it means don't do any of the activities done in building the Tabernacle. In all, there are 39 activities which involve prohibitions.

The Talmud explains further that any act which fulfill the purpose of any of these 39 activities is also prohibited. That means, for example, that not only is planting prohibited, but anything which would stimulate plant growth would be included. That would include watering, pruning, etc. Needless to say, according to this definition, it doesn't matter how strenuous the activity is, but whether it falls under the category of the 39 "melachos" (prohibited activities). In addition to the Torah prohibitions, the Rabbis instituted many other prohibitions to guard against violating the Torah prohibitions, and in order to maintain the spirit of the day.

It is possible for the uninitiated to feel overwhelmed by all of the things which one may not do on the Sabbath, however, it's all a matter of attitude. It's not "I can't do this, and I can't do that." But, "I don't have to do this or that." The Sabbath is a time when we come to realize that we were not put in this world just to earn a livelihood, albeit a necessary dominating priority. We don't have to drive car pool, take phone calls, etc. We change pace. The Sabbath is when we remind ourselves that we are spiritual beings with a spiritual purpose, and we pursue it on the Sabbath. Earning a livelihood is the vehicle through which we maintain ourselves on the physical level. Then we can concentrate on our true essence. We can remove the mask of the big executive, or whichever mask we must wear at

work. On the Sabbath we all come together before the same G-d, Who sees us for what we are, rich and poor alike. We can uninhibitedly be ourselves in prayer before G-d, as He recognizes us by who we are under the social mask. By day we listen to the reading of His Torah. We come home to sit at the table as a family, to eat the festive Sabbath meal, sing Sabbath songs, and share of ourselves in the company of loved ones and friends.

The Sabbath is mei' ein olam haba'a, "the essence of the world to come." One who experiences a Sabbath where it is kept properly, starts to feel that this is how the world was really meant to be. Upon leaving such a Sabbath atmosphere, one is already anticipating the next one. It leaves an impression on the soul, and it shapes and molds the way we spend our week. May we all be privileged to taste the sweetness of the Sabbath!

Good Shabbos!

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