

WHEN WOULD WE BE?

by Rabbi Label Lam

Moshe called the whole community of the Children of Israel to assemble, and he said to them: "These are the things that HASHEM commanded to make. Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have sanctity, a day of complete rest to HASHEM; whoever performs work thereon [on this day] shall be put to death. You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwelling places on the Sabbath day." (Shemos 35:1-3)

How can the Shabbos be such a day of delight with a threatening admonition enforcing our behavior? I can testify along with many times many others that it is absolutely a day of sublime joy and relaxation. Why the need for the rugged rules?

A colleague and friend, a lawyer, in fact, not even a rabbi, once gave the following fascinating explanation at the onset of Shabbos at a weekend for the uninitiated. I have to admit that I was amazed at the utter elegance of his logic. You see Shabbos is much maligned and notorious for its many so called "Negative Mitzvoth". He cleverly exploded the myth of the "Negative Mitzvah". There are no "Negative Mitzvos". Sure they inhibit certain behaviors rather than require action but that's not negative in the pejorative sense. There are 39 basic prohibitive categories of action that are strictly forbidden on Shabbos and each one has theoretically 39 subsets, not to mention a host of Rabbinical prohibitions as well. There is this fearful sense that one is entering a kind of prison surrounded by endless rules. Sounds awfully negative to the untutored!

He explained that "Negative" Mitzvos are actually more liberating than positive or activity Mitzvos. How so? If I have a long "to do" list, my day will be consumed with all the things that have to get done. Each one of them requires that I be there to perform the act. Since I am required to put on Tefillin at a certain time I have to take the time to do that deed. Matzos on Pesach, Lulav on Sukkos, and Learning Torah: Each demands my presence and anchors me to a given time! I'm happy to live productively but in a world with a finite amount of time, and energy tough choices have to be made.

This is not so with so called "Negative Mitzvos"! As long as I am not doing any of the things on my "don't" list I can be doing almost anything else. As long as I am not lighting a match on Shabbos or writing I can be enjoying a world of endless possibilities. We can eat and take walks and sing and talk and sleep and learn and whatever. All the time I am not killing or coveting everything else is potentially available. I am not bound by those "Negative Mitzvos" I am made free by the discipline of refraining. They are not "Negative" at all! They are only prohibitive. They demand that we desist from

those specific behaviors but they do not bind us in the least.

The hardest part and perhaps the only real steep challenge to the premise is that one has to surrender the proverbial hammer and the ubiquitous cell phone on Shabbos! The impulse to do these no-no's and the internal wrestling can become the biggest barrier to experiencing the true sublime goodness of Shabbos! It can be a huge problem! It's what kills "days off" and vacation time. I have a cute New Yorker style cartoon of a hapless fellow lying in a backyard hammock trying to casually read his newspaper. All around his those little "speech bubbles" used in cartoons dot the yard as all the things in need of repair are calling out to him like the Sirens luring Ulysses, with phrases such as, "Mow me", "mend me", "paint me", "fix me" etc. The gentleman looks anything but relaxed in his habitat. There is no end to our tasks or our compulsion to do and be distracted by "work"!

To the rescue comes the "tough love" language of the Torah, for our own good and our very sanity. It forbids us to do all those things we might otherwise just do. The internal struggle is concluded. The negotiations are no more. The war is over! HASHEM says "NO!" Whatever is done is done! Whatever is not- is not our business. We are free! We can talk, and eat and sing and walk and sleep and rest and read and just be... with family and friends and ourselves and oh yeah, with HASHEM. If it wouldn't be for that overpowering order, where would we be? Who would we be? What would we be? **When would we be?** DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.