

STOKING THE COALS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Strangely, Parshas Vayakhel, which (excepting the first three verses) deals exclusively with the completion of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), begins with the mitzvah of Shabbos. Rashi explains that the Torah "squeezed" Shabbos in before concluding its discussion of the Mishkan in order to allude to us that, notwithstanding the great importance and esteem of the Tabernacle, its construction does not supersede Shabbos. One may not do any Mishkan construction on Shabbos; thus Shabbos pre-empted the m'leches haMishkan. While this halacha is certainly crucial, we may ask why it is that the Torah chose to present it in such a fashion instead of simply stating outright that we may not build the Mishkan on Shabbos, especially in light of the fact that Rashi already derived this identical halacha from a different verse in last week's parsha (Ki Sisa 31:13; "However, you must keep my Shabbos!..." the word "however" teaches that despite the Tabernacle's importance, its work may not be done on Shabbos). Also, it seems strange that the Torah prefaces its discussion of Shabbos with the words, "These are the things that Hashem commanded to do them." Isn't the idea of Shabbos not doing?!

The three-verse discussion of Shabbos has another anomaly: It singles out only one of the thirty-nine forbidden types of work. "You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwellings on the day of Shabbos." Indeed, Chazal, our Sages, question why the Torah chose to openly discuss hav'ara, the prohibition of burning, while all the other malachos (forbidden types of work) are derived exegetical.

If we were forced to decide what, in our opinions, is the overriding theme of Shabbos, many of us would likely answer: Menucha - above all Shabbos is a day of rest. This perception is indeed borne out in the Torah, where we are told that just as Hashem "rested" from doing work on Shabbos, putting an end to the process of creation, so too we must rest. It is often overlooked (or perhaps conveniently forgotten) that Shabbos is not only a day of rest, but also a day of spiritual completion, or "kedusha." As we say in the She'mona Esrei prayer of Shabbos: "A day of menucha (rest) and kedusha (holiness) You have given to Your nation..." As the ba'al Akeidas Yitzchak tells us; far more than simply a day of R&R, Shabbos is a day when the Heavenly spheres open up, and we are able to reach levels of wisdom and sanctity far removed from our grasp during the weekdays. "And G-d blessed the seventh day - and He made it holy." Shabbos' blessing is not simply that we can sleep in, and are once-a-week spared the drain of making a living and doing work; it is a blessing of kedusha. "Kedusha" is not something one usually looks for between the bedcovers, or on the couch with a newspaper and a plate of cookies.

This, explains Beis Aaron, is the "doing" aspect of Shabbos. While we are commanded "not to do" certain type of work on Shabbos, we are at the same time encouraged to take advantage of Shabbos' spiritual blessings, and use Shabbos as an opportunity to revitalize our souls and grow in our avodas Hashem (service of Hashem), thereby striving toward the ideal of kedusha with which Shabbos was blessed.

Why is it, then, that while we all seem to be able to instantly identify with the menucha of Shabbos (witness, for example, the ease with which we fall asleep at the Shabbos table Friday night), it seems so difficult to tap into its kedusha? Chasam Sofer explains that on Shabbos, there burns a fire. Not a physical fire; that indeed is forbidden. But rather a spiritual fire. In the heart of every Jew, even one who all week is so busy and absorbed with his work that he barely has time to pray and learn, on Shabbos he can "ignite" his neshama and elevate himself to feelings and ideals far removed from his weekday self. But there's one condition: A (physical) fire which was lit before Shabbos, says the Gemara, may continue to burn on Shabbos. But we are forbidden to ignite fires on Shabbos. So it is with the spiritual "soul fire," if we don't get it going before Shabbos, by preparing ourselves spiritually, we're not going to have any warmth on Shabbos. This, he explains, is the hidden meaning of the verse, "You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwellings on Shabbos!"

The idea behind the construction of the Mishkan, we know, is that "You shall make for Me a dwelling place; and I will dwell amongst you." When we had the Mishkan, and later the Beis HaMikdash, we possessed a place in which every Jew could come and experience kedusha - closeness to Hashem and the spiritual uplifting this entailed. Perhaps we could say that if the Mishkan was Hashem's dwelling within the realm of space, then Shabbos is Hashem's Mishkan in the realm of time. Shabbos is the place where one, if he so desires, can experience Hashem's closeness in ways otherwise impossible. Seen in this light, it would be almost self-defeating to transgress Shabbos in order to build the Mishkan; it would be missing the whole point, which is that while the Mishkan is where Hashem can be "found" in space, Shabbos is where He is found in time! But this part of Shabbos, as the Chasam Sofer explains, requires preparation. We have to get the fire burning before Shabbos if we want to feel the warmth of Shabbos.

Perhaps this is why the Torah restates the prohibition of Mishkan construction on Shabbos here, doing so by placing Shabbos before the m'leches haMishkan, and by singling out the malacha of kindling fires. Shabbos comes before the Mishkan, because it leads to the same ideal that the Mishkan did, but it must be prepared for in advance, by getting our spiritual fires burning, if we are to avail ourselves of its blessings.

Have a warm Shabbos!

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