

SHABBOS, THE MISHKON AND THE RED HEIFER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

To say that Shabbos is a cornerstone of Judaism is an understatement. When we had a Sanhedrin, a Jewish High Court, and a Jew knowingly violated Shabbos after being warned not to, he could receive the death penalty. If those who warned him did not witness the violation, though he was not sentenced to death, he was nevertheless "cut off" from the Jewish people.

Such severe ramifications we usually associate with severe violations, such as idol worship, or murder, God forbid. With respect to Shabbos, the amazingly frightening thing is that culpability can be the result of a simple act, such as turning on a light switch, striking a match, or even just turning wheat into flour, etc. Intentionally remove a bad apple from a bowl of good ones and it is a serious violation of Shabbos.

This is one of the tricky things about Shabbos. When it comes to other sins it is usually a sin all the time. Treif is treif is treif. Shabbos, on the other hand, prohibits activities that are usually permitted the other days of the week. Thus, for one day of the week, "kosher" becomes "treif," and a violation of Shabbos can occur in the wink of an eye and have an eternal impact.

The saving grace with respect to Hilchos Shabbos is that, unlike with respect to other sins, such as eating unkosher food, the violation must be a "melachah machsheves," a calculated act. If a person inadvertently eats treif meat he has still transgressed, even if he thought he was eating kosher meat. Leaning against a wall and inadvertently turning on a light is completely permissible on Shabbos.

This is because when it isn't Shabbos the 39 forbidden activities are permissible to perform. A treif animal is intrinsically treif, regardless of the knowledge and the intention of the person eating it. On Shabbos it is specifically the knowledge and intention of the person that determines culpability, and to what extent. Why the difference, and what is there to learn from it?

The Torah states:

God created man b'tzelem Elokim—in the image of God. (Bereishis 1:26)

This verse is both informative and confusing. On one hand it tells us what makes us unique and Who we are like. This helps us to better determine our potential as human beings and how best to use it. If you know who you are like, then you can figure out who you are as well.

However, Who is God, at least in terms of how we are like Him? What does it mean to be a Tzelem-Elokim? The Sforno explains:

The term Elohim can be used to describe every intelligent force that is separated from matter (i.e., spiritual instead of physical) . . . As such, it is eternal, and thus the term is used regarding God and His angels. It is also applied to judges because of their ability of reason [and power of discernment]. (Sforno, Bereishis 1:26)

Ability to reason. Power of Discernment. This is the essence of what it means to be an Elohim. To the extent that a human being acts in this capacity, based upon his potential to do so, he is living up to his Godly potential. To such a person the following verse can be applied:

I said, "You are Elohim; sons of the Most High are you all." (Tehillim 82:6)

In other words, animals only act. Humans, however, can act thoughtfully, and to the extent that they do they earn the right to be called an "Elohim." This is the difference between living on "autopilot" and using your free will for its intended purpose, the entire point of Creation:

Therefore, it (evil) had to be given new strength, so that free will should remain, and to renew the basis of the reason for Creation. (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 2, Siman 4)

The Torah was given to man to make him think. We make blessings before we do things in order to make us consider what we are about to perform, and what it means to us and Creation. We investigate concepts in order to better understand the world in which we live, and to train us to become better thinkers. The entire Talmudic process is all about developing our minds to think more like God.

"Did I just make a brochah on this apple?" If a person has to ask, then he wasn't paying attention and made a blessing while on auto pilot.

"What was I just about to do?"

A person wouldn't wonder this if he was conscious of the moment.

It's all about living in the moment, because there is "being" and then there is being. There is being somewhere physically only, and then there is being somewhere consciously as well. To the extent that we are conscious of a moment and its needs is the extent to which we actually live, which is completely a matter of choice.

This brings us back to Shabbos, and the Mishkan as well for that matter.

It is incredibly easy to be overcome by the energy of the six working days of the week and fall into an auto pilot mode. So much goes on around us from moment-to-moment, and so much pressure is on us on a daily basis that it is easy to become distracted. It is quite "natural" to find ourselves moving from event to event conveyor belt style.

This is why we need Shabbos. Shabbos "trips" the switch and wakes us up to what we have become over the previous six days, to prevent us from making the same mistakes in the following week, or to

help us to continue on the same path if we acted wisely. It is time to take stock of the good and the bad, to strengthen the former while rejecting the latter.

One of the best ways to make people focus on something is to reduce or eliminate it, especially if it is something or some activity that can bring benefit. Thus Torah restrictions not only protect us from that which might reduce our Elokus—Godliness, they also make us think about what we are doing, why, and how.

Even this is not absolute. People can adapt and learn to accept their restricted way of life and live it on autopilot. Even when it comes to most Torah restrictions it is possible to create a reality whereby one can get along just fine without the restricted item or activity. This is especially so when it comes to matters such as kashrus, particularly today, since it is possible to "duplicate" non-kosher foods and ways of eating.

Even the Talmud states that for everything forbidden to the Jew there is something in the world that provides a similar pleasure in a permitted manner. It then goes on to list examples, and it is surprising how true the point it is. There are treif foods that have kosher counterparts. A man cannot marry another's wife, but can once she is divorced. Etc.

This is a double-edged sword. On one hand it makes that which is prohibited seem less so, but on the other hand it makes us less conscious of what we can and cannot do. Thus we are commanded to act towards the mitzvos each day as if it is the first day we received them. This helps us maintain a high level of consciousness of the difference mitzvos make to our lives.

The concept of meleches machsheves helps with this. It is hard to avoid Chillul Shabbos unless a person is somewhat of a talmid chacham—Torah scholar. To properly keep Shabbos, a person has to remain aware of their actions just about every waking moment of Shabbos, and be aware of what is permissible and what is not.

More so than other Torah restrictions those of Shabbos should make a person ask, "What's going on here?" It can't just be about being obedient to God, because the mitzvos we do all week long make us that. Rather, after a little contemplation it should become clear that the laws of Shabbos are specifically designed to remind us that we have strive to live as "Elohims," as intellectual and discerning beings.

The Mishkan was meant to accomplish the same purpose. The Talmud states that a person doesn't sin unless a spirit of insanity enters him (Sotah 3a). This means that for the duration of the sin, the sinner loses touch with reality. He ceases to discern truth and this lowers his spiritual level to that of the animals.

The Mishkan, on the other hand, with its very intricate service, like Shabbos, was a wake-up call. Just being in its environ aroused a person's inner sense of Elokus, and elevated him to a higher level of reality once again. How much more so if he had to bring an animal to be sacrificed on his behalf

because of a sin he committed.

This week we happen to read Parashas Parah, the third of the four special Maftirs read at this time of year. It is about the procedure of the red heifer that was performed on a person who became spiritually defiled with the death, in order for the person to be able to partake of the Pesach Offering.

As Rashi points out, however, the red heifer was also the response to the golden calf. How so? The golden calf was the Erev Rav's attempt to cut themselves free of all moral responsibility and become, to borrow a modern-day term, "party animals." A calf represents youthfulness, and gold, eternity. A golden calf, therefore, was the symbol of eternal youthfulness.

The red heifer, on the other hand, represented the opposite. A heifer carries a yoke and performs its work as per its master. Red is the color of blood and therefore symbolizes the mortal nature of man. The red heifer represents man making the spiritual best of his temporary existence by accepting upon himself the yoke of Heaven.

Thus the golden calf represented a material approach to life and the red heifer, the spiritual approach. The golden calf was the result of shutting out the soul in the decision making process and the heifer, the harnessing of the body's energy to perform soul-like tasks.

This, of course, is the true meaning of freedom, an central topic this time of year. It teaches:

It says: "And the tablets are the work of God, and the writing is God's writing, engraved on the tablets" (Shemos 32:16); do not read, "engraved" (charus) but "freedom" (cheirus), for there is no free individual except for he who occupies himself with the study of Torah. (Pirkei Avos 6:1)

To someone who is not familiar with Torah and what it can do for him, this teaching is a con. Nothing, such people believe, could be more un-liberating than Torah and mitzvos since they "force" a person to obey his soul when he'd rather be taking orders from his body.

No question that the latter may be more fun. However, what people fail to realize, just as the Erev Rav did at Mt. Sinai and since, is that nothing can be less fulfilling. Fun has its place in life, but given the choice between fun and pleasure it is the latter that provides the greatest eternal experience.

True and lasting pleasure comes from personal fulfillment, from becoming our ultimates selves. This is not always fun to pursue, but it is always pleasurable. Shabbos is not always "fun," but it is always pleasurable. Even a day like Yom Kippur, the "Shabbos of Shabboses," may not be fun, but it can be extremely pleasurable.

In fact, Yom Kippur is one of the most pleasurable days of the year since it is the one day of the year when we can be at our spiritual best. This is why it is also a day when people feel the most free: it is the day on which we have the greatest control over our yetzer hara.

Shabbos, the Mishkan, and the red heifer all have this in common. They made us mindful of our life

experience, conscious of our level of existence, and they energized us to harness the power of our souls to reach the level of an Elohim. Chazak.

Text

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