

SHABBOS KODESH

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Moshe gathered together - vayakhel - all of the Jewish people in front of the Holy Ark. Midrash teaches us that somehow all of the Jewish people, millions in number, all were able to gather together in front of the Holy Ark. Not only in front of the Holy Ark, but also between its staves! This statement of the Midrash, like all words of Torah, contains many levels of interpretation and understanding. But to me it seems clear that the Midrash tells us that all of Israel, with all of the differences that are inherent in such a large and diverse group of individuals, can be united into a decent and caring society if they all find themselves within the staves of the Holy Ark - the wide parameters of tradition, halacha and Jewish values. Here in Israel, we are busily engaged in trying to form a coalition government to govern us in times of problems and distress. In democratic societies, there has to be some sort of national consensus in order to govern properly. That national consensus of the Jewish people has always been found within the staves of the Holy Ark. Removing sections of Jewry from that space only brings divisiveness, hatred and ultimately, estrangement from Judaism and Jewish values themselves.

It should be noted that the message that Moshe delivered to Israel at that moment of gathering and convocation concerned itself with the Sabbath. The cornerstone of Jewish life and unity is the Sabbath. When the Torah stated: "Its (the Sabbath's) desecrators will surely die," it meant not only a legal declaration of punishment for violating the Sabbath. It also meant that this was to be read as a prediction, a prophecy, and a statement regarding the harsh reality of the Jewish world. A Jewish society that ignores the Sabbath, that trims it to meet its fleeting whims, that robs it of its spirit and holiness, of its inhibitions and joys, dooms itself to assimilation and spiritual death. No slogans about Jewish continuity or unity can accomplish the good that the respect and observance of one Sabbath day can achieve. When Moshe gathered all of Israel together at the Holy Ark, he purposely told them of the Sabbath, for the Sabbath alone guarantees Jewish unity, Jewish survival and spiritual triumph. Observance of the intricate laws of the Sabbath on an individual basis has always been a continuum and not an absolute. But in all of Jewish history, respect and love for the Sabbath day itself was an omnipresent absolute. It is this respect and love for the Sabbath that is in such dire peril in today's Jewish society. One does not increase respect and love for the Sabbath by adjusting its holy character and time-honored traditions to current conveniences and fads.

The parsha of Vayakhel reviews the materials needed and the workmanship and effort provided for the construction of the mishkan - the Holy Tabernacle - in the desert of Sinai. However, without the unity of Israel - the gathering of Jews within the confines of the staves of the Holy Ark - and without

the sense of holy purpose and noble tradition that only the Sabbath can provide, the mishkan will eventually be nothing more than a physical building filled with ornate artifacts. Its very purpose of challenging and uplifting existence will have been denied. Our generation needs to remember these lessons of Jewish unity within the staves of the Holy Ark and of the holiness of the Sabbath day. Then our mishkan - the sanctuary within our souls and within all of Jewish society - will yet flourish and inspire us.

Shabat Shalom.
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