

SHABBAT PRECEDES THE BUILDING OF THE MISHKAN

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah reading of this week is naturally dominated by the description of the tragedy of the Golden Calf and its consequences. But the story of the Golden Calf in the parsha is preceded by teachings regarding the sanctity of the Shabat. The rabbis attributed the presence of this Shabat subject in the parsha as a further indication that even the construction of the Mishkan cannot take precedence over the sanctity of Shabat.

But there is another insight that is available here as well. The dangers of Golden Calves, false gods, apparently shining and enticing ideals that only lead to eventual disaster, is something that is always present in Jewish society. In our long history as a people there is a long list of Golden Calves that have led us astray and at great cost to us.

Paganism, Hellenism, false messianism, Marxism, secularism, nationalism, humanism and unbridled hedonism, just to identify some of these Golden Calves, have all exacted a terrible toll from us over our history. The Shabat and its holiness and its enforced withdrawal from the mundane and impious world have always stood as the bulwark of defense against these Golden Calves.

The Shabat is our first and strongest line of defense against the sea of falseness and evil that constantly threatens to engulf us. Without Shabat we are doomed and lost. With Shabat we are strong and eternal. There are not many things in history that are that simple to discern but the saving grace of Shabat for Jewish society is one of these really no-brainers.

This is why later in the Chumash in parshat Vayakhel the admonition regarding the laws of Shabat is again repeated in conjunction with a further review of the construction of the Mishkan. The Torah wishes to emphasize that short of human life itself, no cause no matter how seemingly noble takes precedence over the sanctity of the Shabat.

For all human causes, no matter how noble, contain dross with its gold. The Shabat in its eternity and God-given holiness is likened to the World to Come, eternal and everlasting. For many times in our rush to build, we destroy, and in our desire to accomplish great things we trample upon nobility and moral righteousness. The great sage, Baba ben Buta in the Talmud warned King Herod not to destroy the old until the new has already been erected.

The world oftentimes believes that the destruction of the old is somehow a necessary prerequisite to construct the new. The Torah comes to teach us that the old Shabat already observed by the People of Israel even before the granting of the Torah to Israel at Mount Sinai will definitely outlive and outperform the shiny new Golden Calf that is now being worshipped so avidly.

Golden Calves come and go but the eternity of Shabat and Torah remain valid for all times and circumstances. This reflection is buttressed in the Torah by its repetition of the sanctity of Shabat many times in these parshiyot that mark the conclusion of the book of Shemot. Our Mishkan is built only with Shabat and never in contravention of Shabat.

Shabat shalom.

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