

SHABBATH AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

One of the main questions that all of the commentators to this week's parsha raise is why the Torah again discusses the prohibitions of the Sabbath. The Torah has done so a number of times in the previous parshiyot of Shemot so one might question this seemingly unwarranted repetition. One of the ideas presented in their comments I feel to be especially relevant to our world. We do not find that at the time of creation the Torah sanctified any given place or location on the face of the earth. The entire idea of the uniqueness of the Land of Israel does not appear in the Torah until the time of our father Abraham. And there it appears as a promise of a homeland to Abraham's descendants without any mention of holiness or sanctification.

Holiness only appears regarding a place and location in the story of our father Jacob and his heavenly dream at Beit El. However, already in the first section of the Bible, in the story of creation itself, we read that the Lord sanctified time. "Therefore did the Lord bless the seventh day and sanctify it." Time is the holiest of all factors in human life. It is the one thing that since creation has been blessed, sanctified and made very special. It is no wonder therefore that the holiness of the Sabbath is emphasized over and over again in the Torah. In human behavior and thought time is not as important as wealth or location or the accomplishment of any human ends. The Torah comes to warn us not to succumb to such a viewpoint or behavior pattern.

The holy Tabernacle according to most commentators was ordered and built after Israel sinned in the desert by worshiping a golden calf. These commentators saw this Tabernacle as an accommodation, so to speak, of Heaven to the human condition. People somehow require a tangible place of worship, a holiness of space and locality, something solid that can represent to them the invisible and eternal. So the Tabernacle in a sense came to replace the necessity for a golden calf created by human beings.

The Lord, gave Israel detailed instructions how this Tabernacle and its artifacts should be constructed and designed. Even though holiness of space, location and of actual structure is necessary for human service of God, it must be done solely under God's conditions. There can be many designs to build a golden calf. To build a Tabernacle to God there can only be one ordained and holy design and plan. Even when building a Tabernacle according to God's plan, the Jewish people were instructed and inspired to remember that holiness of time is always greater than holiness of place and of structure.

The Sabbath, which has accompanied us from the time of creation, takes precedence over all else

except for human life itself. The Tabernacle and its succeeding Temples were all temporary and subject to the events of time. Even the holy Land of Israel disappeared from Jewish history for millennia. But the Sabbath never stopped accompanying the Jews wherever they lived and whatever their circumstances were. And this is why this lesson is drummed into us over and over again in the narrative of the Torah. How pertinent this lesson is in our time and in our environment.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com