

# A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

*"...These are the things that Hashem commanded, to do them"(35:1)*

Moshe assembles the entire nation and charges them with the thirty-nine categories of labor prohibited on the Shabbos day. From the words that introduce the commandment to observe the Shabbos, "eileh hadevarim asher tziva Hashem" - "these are the things Hashem commanded", the Talmud derives an allusion to the thirty-nine categories of labor, the numerical value of "eileh" being thirty-nine.[1] The remaining portion of the verse seems awkward. Referring to the directive that Hashem has commanded, the verse states "la'asos osam" - "to do them". If Shabbos is a day of curtailed activity, why are the Shabbos restrictions defined as an act of doing? Concerning no other directive do we encounter Moshe addressing the nation as an assembly, a "kahal". Why is it necessary to do so for the mitzva of Shabbos? Why is this mitzva juxtaposed to the sin of the Golden Calf? The Midrash relates that at this gathering Moshe institutes the ordinance that every community is required to provide communal study of the Shabbos laws on the Shabbos.[2] What is the rationale for this ordinance? Why must it specifically be communal studying? Why must the study be particularly of the Shabbos laws?

The effect of observing a mitzva is primarily relegated to the individual performing it. The individual's performance of a mitzva has a negligible impact upon the community; one person keeping kosher does not impact upon the community's observance of the dietary laws. The reverse is true as well; the community's observance of kashrus does not affect the individual's observance of the same precept. Shabbos observance is the exception to this rule. An individual who observes the Shabbos surrounded by others who do not, has a very different experience than one who is surrounded by an observant community. Through his Shabbos observance, each individual within a community helps create the Shabbos environment which enhances every member of the community's Shabbos experience. Conversely, the individual desecration of the Shabbos has an adverse effect upon the entire community. The obligation to observe the Shabbos requires a person to create a Shabbos environment. Therefore, the verse states "la'asos osam" - "to do them"; Moshe is instructing the Jewish community to create the Shabbos. (In Yiddish, a language which is replete with expressions that offer valuable insights into the Jewish psyche and religion, there is a saying "yeder eine macht Shabbos far zich alein" - "each person is making Shabbos for himself". This idiom is used to describe people who are concerned only with their own well-being and not with the well-being of others.)

The sin of the Golden Calf was a result of the human need to connect to a tangible and concrete

object. It is difficult for man to perceive an entity that he cannot see or touch. Therefore, man has a need for symbols which he attaches himself to and with which he can identify. Regardless of how removed a person is from Jewish observance, lighting Chanukah candles or sitting at a Pesach Seder will always be vestiges of his observance, for they are symbols through which a person feels connected.

When Moshe is in Bnei Yisroel's midst they feel connected to Hashem through him. Fearing that he died, Bnei Yisroel require a substitute through which they can once again feel connected to Hashem. The Golden Calf is this substitute.

Another symbol which is critical in enabling a person to sense his connection is his environment. After the sin of the Golden Calf Hashem instructs Moshe to teach Bnei Yisroel how to create a permissible symbol through which they can feel closer to Him. Shabbos is the precept which attests to Hashem being the Creator of the Universe and His ongoing involvement in the maintenance of the world. Participating in the creation of the Shabbos environment allows each individual to feel connected to one another and to Hashem.

Many of the requirements of Shabbos are designated to establish the necessary atmosphere for creating the Shabbos environment, the candles, special clothing, and delicacies being but a few examples. Moshe's instituting communal study of the laws of Shabbos is intended to assist in the creation of the Shabbos environment. Having the entire community come together and study the subtleties and nuances of Shabbos observance effectively enhances the Shabbos atmosphere.

Moshe gathers Bnei Yisroel together as a community after the sin of the Golden Calf to teach them how to create a tangible relationship with Hashem. Celebrating the Shabbos on a communal level is the most effective manner to establish the symbol through which we can connect to our Creator.

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1. Yerushalmi Shabbos 87:5
  2. Yalkut