

PARSHAS VAYAKHEL

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Sfas Emes (Zechuso Tagein Aleinu), Vayakheil and Parshas Hachodesh, 5631

Please note: this Ma'amar of the Sfas Emes is printed in Volume 3, (the volume on Sefer Vayikra), in your Sfas Emes set.

In 1871 (5631) -- the year in which the Sfas Emes became the Gerer Rebbe -- Parshas Hachodesh coincided with Shabbos Parshas Vayakheil. The Sfas Emes spoke on both topics. Faithful to the task of presenting the Sfas Emes's ma'amarim from the beginning of his reign, we will see here Divrei Torah on both topics. Note further : perhaps because the Sfas Emes had so much to say on this double-decker Shabbos, his notes for this Shabbos are unusually cryptic. But here we go, for our best try.

The parsha starts with "Vayakheil". The plain, simple meaning of that word (i.e., its pshat pashut) here is that Moshe Rabeinu brought Bnai Yisroel together. From the context, it seems abundantly clear that the reason Moshe assembled the people was to tell them about building the Mishkan. But then -- seemingly out of nowhere -- Moshe Rabeinu transmits HaShem's command that we observe Shabbos. What is the connection between the "bringing together" and the seemingly irrelevant command about Shabbos? The Sfas Emes answers, telling us that "coming together" or "bringing together" is what Shabbos is all about ... For on Shabbos, all of a person's powers and desires can come together to cling tightly to their Source -- ultimately, HaShem.

Thus, the pshat meaning of "Vayakheil" has Bnei Yisroel coming together with each other. The nonpshat reading that the Sfas Emes has just given us sees the "coming together" on Shabbos as our opportunity to come together with HaShem. The Sfas Emes drives home this reading of "Vayakheil" by quoting the Zohar on the pasuk: " ... Ahl yeitzei ish mim'komo ba'yom ha'shevi'i" (Shemos, 16, 29). The Zohar understands the word "Makom" as an appellation of HaShem (as in the Pesach Haggada, where we say: "Boruch Hamokom, Baruch Hu"). Thus, the Zohar (and the Sfas Emes) read the pasuk quoted above as saying: "Let no person lose his individualized relationship with HaShem on Shabbos." Why "individualized"? Because we are referring to the "makom" within each person.

The Sfas Emes now offers us another way to understand the "coming together" on Shabbos. He does this by quoting three words from the Zohar -- actually words that Nusach Sefarad says every Friday night (in the paragraph that begins "Kegavna"). The key word from that paragraph that the Sfas Emes quotes is "mis'achadim ". This word comes from the root "E'Ch'D" (one). Hence, this new

nonpshat that the Sfas Emes proposes for "Vayakheil" has the sense of "coming together as one" You may be wondering: Who comes together as one? Read on..

Mention of "misachadim" takes us to a glorious perspective on Shabbos. The word "mis'acha'dim" evokes a picture in which on Shabbos, all Creation comes together as one to honor HaShem. And by reading "Vayakheil" in this sense, the Sfas Emes is saying that we too can join the rest of the cosmos in coming together to honor HaShem. (Lest this idea sound fanciful, pretentious, or bizarre, have a look at the chapters of Tehilim (Chapters 29, 93, 95-99) that comprise Kabbolas Shabbos. As you will see, a principal theme in these Tehilim is the elements of nature coming together to honor HaShem.)

At this point, two questions come to mind..The nonpshat readings that the Sfas Emes offers are not at all self-evident. Hence, you may be wondering: what are the Sfas Emes's sources for these radical nonpshat interpretations? As we have seen, the Sfas Emes addresses this question directly, telling us that he is quoting from the Zohar.

Another question says: granted, that each of the three readings of "Vayakheil" is true. But which is the "most true"; i.e., the one to be taken most seriously? I see this question as naive. Why? Because it misses a key feature of reality -- that all of these readings can be equally valid; and all can apply at the same time. Hence, there may be no need to choose between them. And in the rare case where one must choose, choice will surely vary with the context and with the chooser -- inevitably subjective and inconclusive

The Sfas Emes moves on now to another topic. He cites a question that his Grandfather had posed concerning the connection between Shabbos and construction of the Mishkan (the Tabernacle). The Chidushei HaRim noted the following nuance in the Torah's presentation. Before we sinned with the golden calf, the Torah discussed the Mishkan before it spoke to us about Shemiras Shabbos (Sabbath observance). Thus, building the Mishkan came first (in Parshas Teruma and Parshas Te'tzaveh). Only later (at the beginning of Parshas KiSisa) does the Torah give us a statement about Shemiras Shabbos.

By contrast, after the episode of the golden calf, the sequence is reversed. First comes a discussion (in the beginning of Vayakheil) of Shabbos, and only later (in Parshas Vayakheil and in Parshas Pekudei), do we have details concerning building the Mishkan. Why this reversal of sequence? More than a matter of style must be involved. What are the issues of substance? The Chidushei HaRim (and with him, the Sfas Emes) provide a straightforward answer to this question (see below). But en route to presenting that answer, the Sfas Emes makes some mind-boggling statements about the Mishkan, Shabbos, and their interaction. These ideas cry out for explication, so we digress now to discuss them.

One statement that I find mind-boggling is: "Ki avodas hachol hu inyan meleches hamishkan." Translated loosely (but accurately), that is: "How does a person serve HaShem on the weekdays? By building the Mishkan." The Sfas Emes continues with another puzzling statement. By being engaged

in building the Mishkan, we can extend

HaShem's Presence to the very heart of the weekday world of work. In the words of the Sfas Emes, we will be able to: "le'hamshich hashra'HaShechina ba'ma'aseh ma'mash".

This is certainly a bold, new way of thinking about work and about yemos hachol (the weekdays). Boldness aside, how does this work in the real world? I suggest that it comes from a perspective in which our weekday work activities are viewed as preparing this world to be HaShem's dwelling-place. (What does it mean to speak of "HaShem's dwelling-place"? That term refers to a state in which -- so to speak -- HaShem feels comfortable and "at home" -- presumably a state in which Bnai Noach observe their commandments, and we observe ours. That perspective may be too much for most of us to handle. For this reason, HaShem gave us a more accessible representation of His domicile in this world: the Mishkan. ma'mash". Thus, a person can view his/her weekday avoda as an effort at preparing HaShem's domicile -- in the first instance, the idea of HaShem's domicile in this world refers to the Mishkan. But bearing in mind the parallel between the Mishkan and the world as a whole, our weekday labors can be part of an effort to make the entire world fit to be a dwelling-place for HaShem.

The parallel between the Mishkan and the world as a whole has an important halachic implication. On Shabbos, HaShem abstained from creating; and He has commanded us likewise to abstain. A problem comes to mind. We cannot create like HaShem. How, then, can we emulate Ha Shem in abstaining from creating? That is: for practical halachic purposes, what actions should be proscribed on Shabbos?

As noted, we can view our weekday labors as preparing a dwelling place for HaShem. What activities do we employ in doing our weekday labors? If symbolically, we are building the Mishkan, the answer comes back loud and clear: the the melachos used in constructing, equipping, and maintaining the Mishkan. Because of the mishkan/world parallel, the Mishkan's melachos can be a proxy for whatever HaShem used to create the world. And because these actions were used in the Mishkan, they are the activities that HaShem proscribed on Shabbos. And just as HaShem abstained from creating the world on Shabbos, so too, we abstain from doing these activities on Shabbos.

We return now to the main line of this ma'amar. Recall that the Chidushei HaRim and the Sfas Emes raised a question concerning the way the Torah sequenced presentation of two topics: Shabbos and the Mishkan. More particularly, they asked why was the sequence reversed after cheit ha'egail? We are now ready for an answer.

Before we went wrong with the golden calf, what we did during the week -- the melachos of the Mishkan -- constituted a preparation for Shabbos. Thus, during the week, we prepared a dwelling place for HaShem. After that spiritual preparation, when Shabbos came, we could simply be in HaShem's Presence. We could rise to a spiritual height -- an 'aliya' -- and an awareness of HaShem's Majesty. That aliya, in turn, would enable us to achieve a degree of "hisbatlus" -- to substitute

HaShem's agenda for our personal agendas. Thus, before the sin of the golden calf, we were at a high level of ruchniyus. Because we were in that state, HaShem could tell us, first, to build the Mishkan. Only later did He give us detailed instructions concerning Shabbos.

But after the unhappy experience with the golden calf, what we do during the week is no longer on so exalted a level. Now, we need Shabbos to get us through the week in one (spiritual) piece. This is the reason why after cheit ha'eigel, the Torah had to tell us about Shabbos before telling us about building the Mishkan. Now we need the Kedusha of Shabbos to flow into yemos ha'chol. Our everyday activities are now less effective in making this world HaShem's home.

The Sfas Emes moves on now to teach us Torah appropriate for Parshas HaChodesh. He begins from "Hachodesh ha'zeh la'chem" (Literally, "This month shall be for you ...") -- the words that begin this Shabbos's special Torah reading, (from Shemos 12:2). The Sfas Emes had much to say on these words. Here are two of his thoughts.

As you might have expected, the Sfas Emes sees the word "chodesh" (month) as an allusion to the word "chadash" (newness, freshness). Thus he reads the pasuk just quoted ("Ha'chodesh ha'zeh lachem") as telling us: You have it within yourselves to find the Newness -- i.e., the Presence of HaShem -- in everything that you do ("be'chol ma'aseh")! Surely, it would help us attain that goal if we see our everyday work activities as building HaShem's dwelling in this world.

Later in this ma'amar, the Sfas Emes reads "Ha'chodesh ha'zeh la'chem" in another way. The word "chodesh" can also refer to the moon. Thus, the Sfas Emes reads "Ha'chodesh ha'zeh la'chem" as giving Klal Yisroel a mission. The moon ("hachodesh") lights the darkness. So too it is our assignment to shine light, and thus to find HaShem's Presence in the Hester behind which He often chooses to hide Himself.

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