

PARASHAT VAYAKHEL-PEKUDEI

By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

The Shabbat of Sinai and the Shabbat of the Mishkan

This shiur will focus on the first three verses of the parasha, which deal with the observance of Shabbat. Whereas God, in His presentation to Moshe, inserted a discussion of Shabbat at the very end of the instructions vis-a-vis the mishkan (Shemot 31:12-17), Moshe opens his set of guidelines regarding the mishkan with the mitzva of Shabbat.

For two reasons, this switch should come as no surprise:

A. On the literary level, the verses dealing with Shabbat serve to return the narrative to the flow of events which had been disrupted by the golden calf. The mitzva of Shabbat immediately reminds the reader of God's discussion of Shabbat which occurred just prior to the sin of the golden calf, thus restoring the narrative flow.

B. On the logical level, it made sense for God to leave this detail until the end - first He described the essence of the task (building the mishkan and its utensils), and only then did He relate to technical details, such as who is to build it and when. Moshe, on the other hand, was giving the people practical instructions in order to carry out this major operation. Thus, he begins his remarks with the basic limitations on the construction, when the work may be performed and when not.

Although these answers may suffice to resolve the change of order, they do not explain the actual need for this lengthy treatment of Shabbat in the first place. Granted, God and Moshe need to warn the workers that the construction of the mishkan would not override the prohibitions of Shabbat. But this reminder could have been expressed in just a few words. Why does the Torah invest so much text to the laws of Shabbat observance? Although the people had already been instructed with regard to Shabbat observance both in Midbar Sin (in the context of the manna) and again at Mt. Sinai (in the fourth of the Ten Commandments), God spends six verses

telling Moshe about Shabbat at the conclusion of His remarks regarding the construction of the mishkan. Why?

Upon closely examining the commandment of Shabbat presented in conjunction with the mishkan, we will discover new dimensions of Shabbat, qualities fundamentally connected to the function and conceptual underpinnings of the mishkan. In order to fully appreciate the unique contribution of this account of the mitzva of Shabbat, let us recapitulate the six mentions of Shabbat in the Book of Shemot, pointing out the special characteristics of each:

1. In Midbar Sin, the Jews were instructed not to collect manna on Shabbat. Instead, they were to stay at home and take advantage of the double portion given on Friday.

2. In the Ten Commandments, the mitzva of Shabbat appears in a clear, chiasmic structure, which enables the reader to easily detect the character and function of Shabbat (Shemot 20:8-11):

A. "Remember the Shabbat day and keep it holy."

B. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Shabbat of Hashem your God"

C. "You shall not do any work - you, your son or daughter, your male or female servant, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements."

B. "For in six days God made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day."

A. "Therefore, God blessed the Shabbat day and sanctified it."

One must sanctify the day of Shabbat, just as his Creator did (A). This sanctification is effectuated by halting work on the seventh day, following the pattern established by the Almighty at creation (B). The centerpiece of the commandment transmits the fundamental precept of Shabbat - that no labor be performed, neither by the individual himself nor by those who generally work for him.

Thus, this structure of the Fourth Commandment clearly associates the individual's observance of Shabbat with that of the Almighty. At Mt. Sinai, God stresses man's obligation to follow God's lead and sanctify the day of Shabbat.

3-4. The Torah refers to the mitzva of Shabbat once again towards the end of parashat Mishpatim (23:12) and, correspondingly, in the renewal of the covenant in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf (in parashat Ki-Tisa, ch. 34). However, there appears in this context a totally different reason for the mitzva: "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and donkey may rest, and that your bondman and the stranger may be refreshed." Here, Shabbat is characterized by the societal interest in allowing the workers an opportunity to rest. Employers are bidden to allow their employees a weekly vacation. (This reason appears once again in Moshe's recounting of the Ten Commandments in Sefer Devarim. This relates to the general question of the complex relationship between the Ten Commandments as presented in Sefer Shemot and as presented in Devarim, a topic beyond the scope of our discussion.)

5-6. The two final references to the mitzva of Shabbat appear in the context of the building of the mishkan, as we noted above. In these final two references, two significant and heretofore unseen pieces of information appear: "He who desecrates it shall be put to death; whoever does work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his kin" (31:14). For the first time, we encounter a punishment for the violation of Shabbat - "karet." Secondly, we discover in these verses the concept of "chilul," desecration. One who fails to observe the Shabbat has not only VIOLATED a commandment, but has DESECRATED the Shabbat. The Shabbat is to be viewed as a sacred entity, and thus neglect of its laws result in a desecration of its sacred quality. This concept - the inherent sanctity of Shabbat - appears for the first time in this context, in association with the mishkan. Although the Ten Commandments require the individual to "sanctify the Shabbat," that obligation relates to the person's refraining from work. Here, one who neglects the Shabbat not only fails to sanctify the day, but he desecrates and profanes it.

The unique contribution of this parasha to our understanding of Shabbat becomes clearer upon a closer literary analysis of God's presentation of the mitzva to Moshe, which Moshe himself paraphrases in his own presentation to the people:

A. Nevertheless, you must keep My Shabbatot

B. for this is a sign between Me and you throughout the ages

C. that you may know that I, God, have sanctified you.

D. You shall keep the Shabbat, for it is holy for you.

E. He who desecrates it shall be put to death; whoever does work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his kin.

F. Six days may work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be a Shabbat of complete rest, holy to God;

E. whoever does work on the Shabbat day shall be put to death.

D. The Israelite people shall keep the Shabbat,

C. observing the Shabbat throughout the ages as a covenant for all time.

B. It shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel,

A. for in six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed.

Here, too, the chiasmic structure cannot be overlooked. The central feature (F) stresses the basic command, that one must refrain from work on the seventh day. Were the final verse (the second "A") placed immediately following this basic command, then this treatment of Shabbat would parallel that of the Ten Commandments. However, this parasha features several other elements in between: the death penalty for violators (E), emphasis on the requirement to observe (D), the unique relationship between the Almighty and Benei Yisrael as expressed by the institution of Shabbat ("I have sanctified you;" "observing the Shabbat as a covenant" - C) and the quality of Shabbat as an "ot," an eternal sign between God and His people (B). Thus, although the basic command (F), as well as both the opening and ending (A), correspond to the commandment of Shabbat at Mt. Sinai, this framework is most likely intended to underscore the added information contained here, beyond that which was presented at Sinai.

Significantly, there exist two differences between the two halves of the parasha (A-E; E-A). Firstly, whereas in the first half God refers to the nation in second person, in the second half the third person form is employed. As opposed to "for this is a sign between Me and you throughout the ages" in the first half, the second half reads "it shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel." Similarly, while the first half orders the people directly, "You shall keep the Shabbat," the second half states, "The Israelite people shall keep the Shabbat," and so on.

This distinction between the two halves of the parasha may very well relate to another clear difference between them: the first section consistently focuses on the element of "kedusha" as the underlying motif of Shabbat, a component omitted from the second half. The kedusha of Shabbat, as described by the first half of the parasha, is manifest in three ways:

A. God sanctifies Benei Yisrael: "for I am Hashem Who sanctified you."

B. Benei Yisrael sanctify the Shabbat: "You shall keep the Shabbat, for it is holy for you."

C. God Himself sanctifies the Shabbat: "a Shabbat of complete rest, holy to God."

Thus, Shabbat is holy both for God and the Jewish people, and, consequently, Benei Yisrael become a sacred people in the eyes of God. In other words, God, in order to sanctify the people, presents them with His unique gift, an item of ultimate sanctity to Him. The moment they, too, sanctify the Shabbat, they become sacred before the One Who had sanctified the Shabbat in the first place - God. Through the Shabbat, which is sanctified to both God and Benei Yisrael, Benei Yisrael become a holy nation before the Almighty.

In parashat Vayakhel, as Moshe recounts God's commandment regarding the Shabbat, he includes both elements of the sanctification of the Shabbat: "On six days work may be done, but the seventh day shall be holy for you, a Shabbat of complete rest to God; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death" (Shemot 35:2). The seventh day will be "holy for you," for it is a "day of complete rest to God." Based on the lengthier commandment he heard from God, Moshe incorporates both sources of the sanctity of Shabbat in his monologue to the people.

This "romantic" quality of Shabbat uniting God and Israel, captured by Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz's "Lekha Dodi" prayer, has never appeared earlier in Chumash. The previous references to Shabbat involve the individual's cessation of work on the seventh day, thereby testifying to God's having brought into existence the entirety of creation.

Here, for the first time, Benei Yisrael stand before the Almighty and are elevated to a unique stature of "kedusha."

The second half of the parasha in Ki-Tisa seems to reflect the earlier aspect of Shabbat, the one expressed by the Ten Commandments. In this sense, Shabbat involves not Benei Yisrael's position vis-a-vis the Almighty, but rather "For in six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed." Thus, God's discussion of Shabbat, with which He concludes His guidelines regarding the mishkan, combines the two different functions of Shabbat - the testimony to God's having created the world, and the more "intimate" quality of Shabbat - the unique, sacred relationship between the Almighty and His people.

For this reason, specifically in the first half of this section God refers to the nation in second person, as if He converses, so-to-speak, with Benei Yisrael. In the first half, the people stand directly before the Almighty as they become sanctified to Him. In the second half, by contrast, Benei Yisrael are referred to in third person. Here they stand not before God, but before creation, testifying to its having emerged by the divine word.

Since the element of kedusha emerges here as a central theme of Shabbat for the first time, it now becomes clear why the concept of "desecration" of Shabbat first appears in this presentation of Shabbat. One who violates the Shabbat undermines its sacred quality, and is guilty of not only violating God's commandment but of desecrating His holy day.

The final issue to be addressed is why does this concept of the sanctity of Shabbat first appear here, in the context of the construction of the mishkan? It would seem that the answer lies in another form of kedusha, that of the mishkan itself. After the people learn of the proverbial "House of God," after hearing about the mishkan, which represents the concept of ontological sanctity of place, they are now prepared to appreciate the concept of sanctity of time. If there can be a specific location that is elevated to a superior level of kedusha, then there can exist as well one timeframe exalted over other periods of time. God thus introduces the concept of the sanctity of Shabbat, a status capable of desecration, and whose violators are thus liable for the punishment of "karet."

When delineating the specific forbidden activities that warrant capital punishment on Shabbat, Chazal based themselves on this association between the mishkan and Shabbat. Specifically from here one can derive the concept of "chilul" (desecration) and, consequently, specifically here one can speak of capital punishment. Indeed, the sanctity of Shabbat, the prominent theme in this specific context, warrants severe punishment for its desecration.

(Translated by Rav David Silverberg)

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