

Echoes of Eden

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Parashat Vayakhel 5774

Creativity

Parashat Vayakhel finds us in the midst of the construction of the Sanctuary, The Mishkan, and contains precise instructions for the select and elite group of artisans that will create the Mishkan itself, the objects it will house, and the ritual garments. In the midst of these highly detailed descriptions, Moshe gathers the people to give them instruction concerning Shabbat. Although this is not the first discussion of Shabbat, one particular prohibition is singled out in this parasha's treatment that is not found elsewhere.

Generally, the Torah does not spell out specific activities that are prohibited on Shabbat; the scriptural treatment of Shabbat is largely generic, aimed at creating the philosophical framework for its observance. The particulars of the Laws of Shabbat, the 39 categories of creative activity that are proscribed on the weekly day of rest, are transmitted mainly through the Oral Tradition. Rabbinic tradition teaches us that the underpinnings for all of the laws regarding creative activity on Shabbat are learned from the context created by Parashat Vayakhel: Because the particulars of the Laws of Shabbat are transmitted in the context of the building of the Mishkan, a line is drawn between the work of the various artisans that would create and furnish the Mishkan, and the activities from which we refrain in observance of the Shabbat.

The parallel that this juxtaposition creates goes beyond the basic categories of creative endeavor: It implies a parallel between God's creation of the world and man's ability to give testimony to that creation as well as to produce a microcosm of that creation through the building of the Mishkan.

The opening verses of Parashat Vayakhel are true to this general method, as they present the concept of the six day work-week and the seriousness of the prohibition against creative labor on Shabbat. The statement that is 'tacked on' to this somewhat familiar formula seems uncharacteristically detailed, singling

out the prohibition against the active use of fire on the Sabbath. This specific prohibition is best understood in terms of the broader underpinnings of Shabbat as a microcosm or imitation of God's creation of the universe. Bereishit recounts the origins of creation, first in the general statement, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth", and then with the specific act of creation: "Let there be light." In much the same fashion, we are commanded in a general sense to observe the Shabbat, and then immediately commanded to desist from using the creative force of fire. In a very real sense, our use of fire, our ability to

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harness energy, is the primary manifestation that man is created in the image of God. In echoing the dramatic call, "Let there be light," we may even delude ourselves into believing that we, too, are gods. The fact that we do not make creative use of this power on Shabbat allows us to regain our perspective, to readjust our sights, and to reconnect with the Creator.

However, the creative activities from which we refrain on Shabbat do more than readjust the playing field in terms of our relationship with God. The laws of Shabbat also serve as great democratizers, allowing us to readjust our social perspective as well. One prohibition in particular, the prohibition to carry or transfer material from one location to another, poignantly illustrates this aspect of Jewish law.

In a sense, these two activities - harnessing the power of fire and transporting objects from place to place - seem almost diametric opposites. The former stands at the forefront of human achievement, transforming both the object to which it is applied and our lives in general; the latter simply transports but does not transform. Moving an object does not alter it in any way, and hardly seems creative. In fact, Rabbenu Tam, one of the great sages of the Middle Ages, categorized carrying/transferring as a "weak creative activity."

When I studied these laws with the late Rabbi Josef Soloveitchik, he remarked that they reminded him of the history of Europe's trade unions. When the trade

unions began organizing close to a century ago, artisans' guilds strongly opposed the inclusion of those involved in transport – carriage and wagon-train drivers, mule-team leaders, as well as railroad workers and, much later, truckers. The skilled, “creative” professionals, many of whom practiced trades that had been handed down for generations, were not inclined to consider the “non-creative” movers as equally deserving of representation and protection. Rabbi Soloveitchik compared this approach to Rabbenu Tam’s description of the halachic category of carrying objects on Shabbat as “weak creative activity” that is nonetheless prohibited on Shabbat.

And herein lies the great democratizing effect of the laws of Shabbat: The activities that stand at the apex of creative activity – using fire to cook or forge, writing or erasing written words, planting or harvesting, dyeing, spinning or sewing – are equal, in the eyes of Shabbat observance, to the “weakest” creative activity, in which an object is moved from one place to another. In creating the Mishkan, the skilled artisans were involved in the creation of the holy objects and the Sanctuary – and the movers and construction laborers were equally involved. Their contribution was valued, their task no less holy. Similarly, in the eyes of Jewish law, production, transport and delivery are all links in the chain of commerce, and are therefore equally proscribed on Shabbat. The day of rest applies equally to every laborer and every type of creative labor. Just as every Jew had a part in the Mishkan, so every Jew has a part in the holiness of Shabbat.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/02/audio-and-essays-parashat-vayakhel.html>

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