

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei – The Power of Shabbat

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As we come to the close of Sefer Shmot, it is worthwhile to take a look back and see the progress that Bnei Yisrael has made over the course of the book. The beginning of Sefer Shmot opens with the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt. They are subjected to task masters that afflict them with burdens and press them to build storage cities for Paraoh. Bnei Yisrael's lives were embittered with hard bondage that included building with mortars and bricks and working in the fields. All their labor was performed with crushing harshness.¹ Later on, when Moshe is sent by God to intercede with Paraoh on their behalf, Paraoh's first response is to increase the burdens and the demands placed on Bnei Yisrael. He decrees that the slaves will now need to source their own raw materials while still meeting the previous output demands placed upon them.² The work is so oppressing that people are unable to hear the message of redemption that Moshe brings to them.³ In that light, the Shabbat presented to Bnei Yisrael in parshat HaMan and in the Aseret HaDibrot seems to be a contrast to Bnei Yisrael's experience in Egypt.⁴ It is literally a day of rest from the toil of the six preceding days and a weekly release for those enslaved because they too are entitled to a Shabbat.⁵ That picture fades in the subsequent narratives where Shabbat is continuously juxtaposed to the building of the Mishkan.⁶

Starting with Parshat Terumah and through the remainder of Sefer Shmot, the people are also engaged in work, the building of the Mishkan. While God is clearly a more benevolent master, which in of itself would have been sufficient reason for Yetziyat Mitzrayim (יציאת מצרים), it still begs the question as to whether Bnei Yisrael have just traded one type of work and master for another. If Sefer Shmot is about the "Building of a Nation" ([see here](#)) then we would expect to find a more fundamental distinction between the labor of Mitzrayim and the work in the Mishkan. Pinpointing that difference would then likely shed light on the transformation that Bnei Yisrael has undergone through Sefer Shmot.

The slave labor in Egypt is never termed Melacha, only Avoda. The purpose of the toil and labor in Egypt is not for its productivity, but for its ability to enslave and break the spirit of the people. Evidence of that is the decree that Bnei Yisrael collect their own raw materials for the making of the bricks which clearly would force the people to work harder but was unlikely to produce a better output. If the goal of the enslavement was the fruits of the labor then efficiency would have been the highest priority. Paraoh makes it clear that he wants to intensify the work (תכבד העבודה) on the people so that they are burdened with strenuous labor and no longer distracted with delusions of redemption. This is reinforced by the Midrashim⁷ that suggest that Bnei Yisrael were forced to build on unstable ground where the work would be fruitless. In contrast with the enslavement in Egypt, the work of the Mishkan is called Melacha. The description of the building is also replete with the phrases "of willing heart" (נדיב לב), "of wise heart" (חכם לב) and the work entailed craftsmanship, the spirit of God, wisdom, understanding and knowledge (רוח אלקים בחכמה בתבונה ודעת ובכל מלאכה). Aside from the clear distinction that the Mishkan was built with voluntary work as opposed to slave labor, there also seems to be a significant qualitative difference between the work performed for the building of the Mishkan (מלאכה) and the slave labor of Egypt (עבודה).

The Malbim⁸ defines Melacha (מלאכה) as "any endeavor that a person engages in with a particular goal in mind." He then adds that Melechet Avoda (מלאכת עבודה) is Melacha with the added dimension of "shouldering extra burden and requiring bodily exertion." It is generally associated with work in the field, like plowing, seeding or harvesting, activities that require significant effort and work that one would normally outsource to slaves or laborers. The Torah prohibits engaging in Melechet Avoda on Yom Tov since it would seemingly detract from the focus of the day by quashing one's ability to experience joy (שמחה) and leaving them little time or spirit to bask in the presence of God. On the other hand, it encourages utilizing Melechet Ochel Nefesh (מלאכת אוכל נפש) because it serves to facilitate the goals of the Yom Tov by enhancing the enjoyment of the day. The Gemara defines Melechet Ochel Nefesh as anything in the baking process that is from the kneading of the dough and onward (מלישה ואילך). In trying to articulate the reason that kneading is seen as the threshold between restricted and permissible work on Yom Tov, the Ramban⁹ suggests that all processes prior to kneading are Melechet Avoda because they are tasks that are normally done to produce commercial quantities or larger results than the immediate need at hand. All the processes from kneading and onward are Melechet Ochel Nefesh because they are activities that produce household quantities for immediate use. If one were to disassociate the Avoda from the Melacha, the meaning of Avoda alone would be heavy labor or physical exertion and that is the focus of what is restricted on Yom Tov. Melacha alone is not inherently problematic on Yom Tov, only Melacha conjoined with Avoda is an issue. That is why all the Moadim are Zecher L'Yetziyat Mitzraim (זכר ליציאת מצרים) because they are the antithesis of the slavery and drudgery that Bnei Yisrael experienced in Egypt. The redemption from Egypt freed the people from the burdens that made them inattentive to the message of God. Eliminating those distractions is the purpose of the restriction against work on Yom Tov. In contrast, the restriction against work on Shabbat is not just Melechet Avoda, but rather Kol Melacha (כל מלאכה). The type of work undertaken in the Mishkan, Melechet Machshevet (מלאכת מחשבת), the intelligent carrying out of intent, the work of a craftsman, is the paradigm for that which is restricted on Shabbat. Melechet Avoda is also prohibited on Shabbat, not because of the Avoda aspect of it, but because of the Melacha facet. Technically, one

¹ שמות א, ח-יד

² שמות פרק ה

³ וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בְּנֶאֱמָר וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה מִקֶּצֶר רֹחַם וַיַּעֲבֹדָה קִשָּׁה: (שמות ו, ט)

⁴ תוד"ה למען פסחים ק"ז:

⁵ שמות טז, כב-ל שמות כ, ז-י

⁶ שמות לא, יב-יז שמות לה, א-ג

⁷ שמות רבה א, יא

⁸ ספר הכרמל "מלאכת עבודה" ו"מלאכת מחשבת"

⁹ רמב"ן ויקרא כג, וגם במלחמו ה' במסכת ביצה

could engage in physical activity all day long on Shabbat and not be in violation of the restriction against working on Shabbat because it is goal oriented creativity rather than exertion that the Torah prohibits on Shabbat.¹⁰ That is why Shabbat is not only Zecher L'Yitziyat Mitzraim, but more prominently a remembrance of the Creation, Zecher L'Maasei Breshit (זכר למעשה בראשית). Rav S.R. Hirsch¹¹ notes that many conflate the two terms, Avoda and Melacha, and they therefore come to the mistaken conclusion that Shabbat is defined by the desistance from physical activity in order to free the individual to engage in spiritual endeavors. By doing such, they see the cessation of Melacha as a means to an end which would then justify engaging in "light" Melacha or any Melacha that furthers the goal of spiritual engagement on Shabbat (akin to Ochel Nefesh on Yom Tov). He rails against this perversion of the Shabbat as being a manifestation of modern man's desire to adapt the Torah to the demands of life rather than upholding the commitment pledged at Sinai to live a life guided by the Torah, the word and will of God. The Torah is unequivocal in defining the desecration of Shabbat as engaging in any form of Melacha, irrespective of whether it involves any labor, toil or strenuous activity or whether it has a constructive purpose.

The desisting from Melacha on Shabbat is a demand for cessation of all productive and creative activities. This gives one the time and peace of mind to contemplate and inculcate that there is a higher Creator. That acknowledgement brings a realization in its wake that we are not simply masters of our destiny, but rather partners in a greater plan. It should engender self-reflection and a reorientation as to who is at the center of one's world and what is the impetus that drives them. Man's creations should not just be self-serving fabrications. One's creative abilities need to be harnessed in such a way that they are a product of being in consonance with fulfilling the will of the higher Creator. Shabbat fosters submission to God's will by forcing us to relinquish our false sense of control over our environment by demanding a suspension of all productive and creative pursuits. Demonstrably ceding of our selfish goals and desires to a greater plan and authority is that which makes the experience of Shabbat so transformational. Shabbat is not only a day of rest, but a day of inspiration and realignment of trajectory. Only once one has experienced the guiding light and compass of Shabbat can they once again properly reenter the world of the six days of Melacha.

Corona Addendum:

In light of the definition of Melacha stipulated above, the creative and intelligent carrying out of intent, there is one of the thirty-nine Melachot, Hotza'a (carrying), that does not seem to conform to this characterization. The Rishonim¹² are aware of this issue and they term Hotza'a a Melacha Gruah (subpar Melacha) which they explain is why the Gemara, unlike by other Melachot, only entertains violations of Hotza'a and its subsidiaries when they are explicitly found in the Mishkan or in the Pesukim. Even given that somewhat negative portrayal, there might still be an aspect of Hotza'a that does meet the definition of Melacha. Carrying is restricted on Shabbat, however Hotza'a is one of the Melachot that is permitted on Yom Tov even though it does not seem to fit the necessary billing of a process involved in the preparation of food items (צורך אוכל נפש). This is likely because it is an essential part of facilitating the Simcha of Yom Tov which is enhanced by the freedom to move things about at will and by the increased socialization.¹³ Building communities and societies is a creative and intelligent activity of man, therefore it is restricted on Shabbat. Before the advent of the modern Eiruv, Shabbat was a day focused on the nuclear family and the desistance from all creative activity including socialization. That restriction is waved on Yom Tov because it engenders a more joyous experience which serves to strengthen the goals of Yom Tov. The current Corona crisis has many of us locked down in our houses with our nuclear families and with onset of Shabbat and the suspension of electronic communication it leaves us devoid of the normal social and communal structures that we are so accustomed to. Obviously this is not ideal,¹⁴ but it provides us with an opportunity to reflect on our socialization from two perspectives. One is how does our socialization impact on our nuclear family. Are our family's needs unduly subverted in order to meet our social needs and our attempts to portray an image that meets communal expectations? Secondly, is the socialization we engage in a narcissistic endeavor or are we building social structures and communities that further the will of God. This Shabbat gives us a unique chance to reorient and re-anchor ourselves with regards to these priorities. In doing so, we need to think carefully about those that may be the casualties of our socialization and more importantly to widen our social networks to include those that we often forget about or neglect. It is a rare chance to spend quality time with our nuclear family and a "novel" opportunity to contemplate the direction of our partnership with God with regards to the worlds that we usually are so busy building and creating. It would be a huge Kiddush Hashem to be able to turn this terrible tragedy into something constructive that makes God look more favorably upon us and in that merit bring a quick end to this terrible pandemic and provide a Refuah Shleimah to all those in need.

Shabbat Shalom and Besorot Tovot

¹⁰ למרות שטרחה אינה מלאכה, יכול להיות שהיא עדיין אסורה מן התורה. עיין רמב"ן ויקרא כג, כד ורמב"ם הל' שבת כא, א

¹¹ שמות כ, י

¹² ריטב"א ובעלי התוספות וראשונים אחרים בגמ' שבת ב.

¹³ נחמיה ח, י ואבן עזרא שם, ביצה טו: ור"ח שם, אסתר ט, יט וכב וגם רמב"ם הל' יו"ט א, ו

¹⁴ שבת היא מקרא קדש שפירושו ע"פ הרמב"ן "שיהיו ביום הזה כולם קרואים ונאספים לקדש אותו, כי מצוה היא על ישראל להקבץ בבית האלהים ביום מועד לקדש היום בפרהסיא בתפלה והלל לאל בכסות נקיה, ולעשות אותו יום משתה..." (ויקרא כג, ב)