

Parenting from the Parsha- Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei- Spending Time With Our Kids

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Our parsha opens this week with the mitzvah of Shabbat, as Moshe reiterates the commandment to observe Shabbat immediately before he instructs the nation regarding the construction of the Mishkan. At first glance, the commandment of Shemirat Shabbat at this point seems unnecessary, even a bit out of place. After all, the obligation to observe Shabbat has already been transmitted to the nation as one of the 10 commandments, and repeated twice more in Parshat Ki Tisa. Why repeat this obligation again here, right before instructing them concerning the Mishkan? In response to this problem, Rashi quotes a Midrash that maintains that the pairing of Shabbat with the construction of the Mishkan is deliberate. The Torah specifically places the mitzva of Shabbat directly before the instructions concerning the Mishkan's construction in order to teach the nation that construction of the Mishkan does not override Shabbat. Recognizing the understandable excitement that Am Yisrael may be experiencing as they prepare to build the House of G-d, Moshe makes it clear to them that the Mishkan's construction, despite its overwhelming importance, cannot take place at the expense of Shabbat.

At first glance, this seems to be a technical issue. However, my father, Rabbi Shmuel Goldin, in his book *Unlocking the Torah Text Shemot* pgs. 303-305, points out that a fascinating message emerges on a philosophical plane as well. The Mishkan and Shabbat represent two different realms of sanctification- the Mishkan represents the sanctification of space, our ability to imbue holiness into the physical spaces around us, while Shabbat represents the sanctification of time, our ability to create moments of holiness during points in our lives. Moshe's directive to the people to avoid the desecration of Shabbat during the Mishkan's construction teaches us that whenever we have a clash between the sanctification of time and the sanctification of space, the sanctification of time triumphs.

My father adds that "while the clear transcendence of time sanctification over space sanctification remains unexplained in the text, a rationale may be offered from our own experience: *the single most precious and tenuous commodity we possess in life is time*. Our moments are limited; each moment exists...and before we know it, that moment is gone.

There could, therefore, be no greater expression of our belief in and our loyalty to G-d than the dedication of some of our limited moments specifically to His service. The sanctification of time- the dedication of time solely to our relationship with G-d- is one of the highest religious acts possible, transcending other acts of sanctification."

The truth is that the importance of time, and the need to be thoughtful about how we use our time, is a topic that takes center stage over and over again in Jewish thought. As we will read this Shabbat for Parshat HaChodesh, the first Mitzvah given to the Jewish nation is the mitzvah of "החודש ראש חדשים" "הזה לכם", "this month shall be for you the first of the months", as G-d empowers the young, fledgling Jewish nation to take control of their time and the Jewish calendar. In addition, some commentaries suggest that "time" was actually the first phenomenon that G-d created in His creation of the universe. Commenting on the Mishna in Avot 5:1 that states "בעשרה מאמרות נברא העולם", "with ten utterances the world was created", these commentaries note that the word ויאמר actually appears only 9 times in

the Torah's story of creation, not 10. What, then, is the tenth "utterance" referred to in the Mishna? It is, these authorities suggest, the first word in the Torah, בראשית. The word בראשית "In the beginning" refers to God's creation of time- as by definition, in order for there to be a beginning, there needs to be a framework of time- and that is what was first created in the world.

G-d begins the process of creation with the creation of time. The first mitzvah given to Am Yisrael is the commandment to take control our time. The message is clear. Time is our most precious commodity, and how we choose to use our limited time on this earth reflect our values and priorities, and will determine the impact we will have on the world around us. It is no wonder, then, that when the kedusha of Shabbos, the sanctity of time, clashes with the kedusha of the Mishkan, the sanctity of space, that the sanctity of time prevails.

I believe this to be one of the most important messages for us as parents. Simply put, we need to spend much time with our children- both in terms of quantity of time, and the quality of that time. More than anything else, what a young child naturally yearns for is a connection with his or her parent- and to spend time together. When we make a conscious decision to give of our precious time to our loved ones, we are giving them the message that we love them and cherish our relationship with them. More than the toys, gadgets, or anything else that we buy for our young children- what they want more than anything else is us, and spending time with us. This is a truth that we have all experienced as children, and, therefore, one we know intuitively- as the popularity of Harry Chapin's timeless "Cat's In The Cradle" attests.

With the approach of the Chag of Pesach, the Seder night is fast upon us; a favorite time of the year for many children. While there are a number of possible reasons for the evening's attraction, I would suggest that the innate structure of the Seder night- an evening when the entire family comes together, with nowhere else to go- quality hours spent together learning, singing, and connecting- an evening when the parents actively devote their undivided attention to their children - lends itself to providing each child with a sense of contentment and fulfillment like no other night of the year.

In summary, the greatest gift that we can give to our children is the gift of ourselves- our time and our presence- a gift that they innately cherish. While the details of each family's interaction will differ, here are a few final points to consider:

- 1) When we do spend time with our children, it is crucial that we are fully present with them- both physically and cognitively. If we sit with our kids but are distracted by our phones/devices, the implicit message they receive is that our device/phone is more important to us than they are. If we want to spend time with our children in a way that expresses to them how important they are to us, we must make sure we are fully there- no phones or other distractions around.
- 2) We have to shift our mindset regarding the time we spend with our children- and we must pay attention to special moments and opportunities that can help cultivate a deeper connection with them. Shabbos, for example, is a time when most other distractions are absent; prime opportunity to spend extra time with our kids. Bedtime is a uniquely powerful time of the day-

taking two minutes to tuck in a child every night can create memories that a child will cherish forever. I remember one time making the mistake of relaying to a relative that I was babysitting my kids that evening while my wife was away- and was told very clearly that “you don’t babysit your own kids”- you spend time with them, every moment a privilege and opportunity.

- 3) It is important that we spend time with our kids not only doing things that are important to us, but specifically doing things that are important to them. I mentioned in a previous piece that shortly before the birth of my oldest child, I had the privilege to have a personal meeting with Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, zt”l. I asked him about chinuch and raising children, and over the course of the ensuing conversation, there is one line that has always stuck with me- he said to me “you have to make sure to learn with your children, and you have to make sure to play basketball with them”. Some may understand his advice to be a sort of tactic- that in order to get your kids to learn Torah with you, you need to first play ball with them. I always felt, however, (and this was later confirmed in an essay of his I later found where he says this explicitly) that Rav Lichtenstein was saying something totally different- he was suggesting that we should play basketball with our children because that, in and of itself, is important. It is important because any time that you spend with your children is important- and it is also important because you show your children that as their parent, you value and appreciate the things that are important to them. As Rav Lichtenstein himself notes in an essay that I later found- “there is joy, there is wonder, in the ability to play with one’s children; it is not simply a tool, not just instrumental. It is a joy in its own right, and one of the joys which I think G-d fully permits us and wants us to participate in...It is part of what being a family is all about.”

We live in a world that is pulling us in many different directions, with many things vying for our attention- and it is natural for us to struggle to find the proper balance between all the important aspects of our lives. The Torah’s message at the beginning of this week’s parsha- a message that has echoes throughout Jewish thought- is that our time is our most prized possession, and how we spend our time is reflective of our life priorities. Given that for most of us, our family and our children are the most important people in our lives, it behooves us to express that sentiment by spending time, really spending time, with them.

Shabbat Shalom!