

VAYAKHEL

SHABBOS, THE UNIFYING PRELUDE
TO THE MISHKAN

A

A Special Focus on Shabbos

“Moshe gathered the congregation of Bnei Yisrael and told them, ‘These are the words that God commands you: For six days you should work, and you should rest on the seventh day. Anyone who works on the seventh day is guilty of a capital offense. You should not make any fires on the seventh day.’” (Shemos 35:1-3)

Why in this particular rendition of Shabbos does the Torah mention that Moshe gathered the people? Moreover, why in this particular *parsha* of Shabbos does the Torah single out the prohibition against lighting fires? Shabbos has already appeared several times in the Torah, and never until now was the prohibition against making fires mentioned. A third question: Vayakhel-Pekudei is a long review of the construction of the Mishkan. We know there is a connection between the Mishkan and Shabbos—*halacha* states that even though the construction of the Mishkan is a wonderful and important *mitzva*, it was not done on Shabbos. The *mitzva* of keeping Shabbos overrides the *mitzva* of building the Mishkan. Why is this so?

The Connection Between Mishkan and Shabbos

Earlier, the Torah describes in great detail the *mitzva* to build the Mishkan. Following this comes Parshas Ki Sisa, in which the Torah reminds us to keep Shabbos even during the construction of the Mishkan. In Parshas Vayakhel, the *mitzva* of Shabbos precedes the directive to build the Mishkan. Why in the original commandment in Ki Sisa does Shabbos come after the Mishkan commandment, while in Vayakhel, which describes the actual construction of the Mishkan, Shabbos precedes the construction?

The Shem Mishmuel presents an interesting thesis. Between the first commandment to build the Mishkan and this one in Vayakhel, an unexpected event happened, which changed the nature of the Mishkan, even if it externally appeared to be exactly the same. There is a Mishkan directive at Har Sinai in Ki Sisa before the golden calf, and there is another one in Vayakhel after the golden calf. After the *eigel*, everything changed. The *keilim* and measurements are identical, but the nature of each Mishkan is surprisingly different.

This is the key to answering our questions. Based on the Zohar, the Avnei Neizer says that Shabbos is “the secret of one,” the day when everything is one with God. Shabbos is the day when this peace and unity are manifest. During the six days of the week, there is a barrier that distorts this unity. The laws of nature and the automatic functioning of the world create a veil through which it is hard to perceive God in the world. On Shabbos, though, the world and God unite, as do Israel and God. On that day, we feel God’s presence in whatever we do. When the *mitzva* of Mishkan was given, Hashem told Moshe that “*Kol ish asher yid’venu libo yikchu es terumasi*. Every man whose heart motivates him to donate should donate” (Shemos 25:2). The Midrash (Shemos 33) says

this means that each person had enough holiness to warrant his own Mishkan. The phrase “*kol ish*” is missing from Parshas Vayakhel. In this *parsha*, the Torah uses the phrase “*nediv lev*” (35:22), calling on people of generous heart to donate, but does not use the more universal expression of “*kol ish*.”

Before the *eigel*, when the Jewish People were pure and unsullied by sin, every Jew was on such a high spiritual level that he alone warranted the construction of God’s dwelling in the world. However, the sin of the *eigel* effected a spiritual catastrophe. It destroyed the individual level of the Jew. Now, only the nation of Israel as a collective entity could build a house for Hashem’s presence in the world. There was a shift from the individual to the community.

This is why we need Shabbos. Shabbos creates unity between people, the world, and Hashem. Only the lesson of Shabbos gives us the power of connection and unity so that we can merit the connection to God’s presence in the Mishkan.

C

Aharon’s Plan for the *Eigel*

The Shem Mishmuel discusses what happened at the sin of the golden calf and, in particular, the role of Aharon. Aharon gathered the gold, threw it into the fire, and fashioned the calf. He was a great *tzaddik*. How could he do this? How could he make an idol? The second of the Ten Commandments forbids the fashioning of an idol. Of course, he was under tremendous pressure, but even so, how could he do such an *aveira*? According to the Midrash (see Rashi Shemos 32:5), Aharon saw that they had killed Chur, and he didn’t want the people to be responsible for his murder as well. But still, how could he be pressured to make an idol?

The *eigel* was a regression back to the ways of Egypt. But Aharon, as a spiritual doctor, wanted to treat the cause of the

illness, not just the symptoms. Moshe had disappeared and the people felt frantic. But Aharon looked for the real cause. He saw that the people had lost their sense of unity. As long as Moshe was with them, they were united. Since Bnei Yisrael had accepted Moshe as their leader, they stood united around him and loyal to him. They believed that every word he spoke was from God. This created a unity among Bnei Yisrael. Before *matan Torah*, the Torah says, “*Vayichan sham Yisrael neged hahar*” (Shemos 19:2). *Vayichan* is in the singular form. The nation, says Rashi, camped as one. They were unified around Moshe’s leadership.

But after the Ten Commandments were given, Moshe went up to the mountain to learn Torah for forty days and to receive the *luchos*. Chazal say that Hashem held one side of the *luchos* and Moshe held onto the other side with his two hands. They were partners in the Torah. Moshe had detached from physicality. He became a human being who was angelic, beyond the limitations of physicality. He didn’t eat or drink. His soul had in a way departed from his body to go to heaven to receive the Torah. This was an extremely high level. Moshe received the whole Torah, including the *mitzvos* and their explanations and the spiritual insights and lessons of the Torah. But this period became disastrous for the Jewish People, who were left alone without a leader. Moshe had left this world and entered the world of angels to be alone with Hashem in a higher world. Even his spirituality left Bnei Yisrael. The Jewish People felt lost. They did not feel bound together with a single goal of serving Hashem. They had lost their model and teacher of this goal. The loss of Moshe was more than physical—it was a loss of identity for the people.

The Shem Mishmuel explains that Moshe’s role among the people can be compared to the role of the *neshama* in the body. The living soul unites the body. When a person dies and the living soul leaves, the body decays and literally falls apart. What unites the body during life into a single entity? Its life force, the *neshama*.

Similarly, God created the world and its many components in six days. Then, on the seventh day, He made Shabbos. What was the purpose of the Shabbos? It was to unite the world.

The *pasuk* (Shemos 31:17) says Hashem rested on the seventh day (*shavas*) and took a deep breath (*vayinafash*). According to Chassidus, *vayinafash* means that God breathed life into the world. In six days, Hashem created many things, but the world was not united. On Shabbos, he blew His life force into the world, thereby uniting it. On Shabbos, God finished the world. Similarly, the first time the Torah mentions Shabbos, it starts with the word *vayechulu* (Bereishis 2:1), which the Shem Mishmuel explains to mean that Hashem made a *klal*, He united all of His creations.

There is an aphorism that if a butterfly flaps its wings in Japan, a tornado may sometime later rip across South Dakota. Everything in the world is connected. The food chain is a great example of this. The universe must have a life force that connects everything so it doesn't all fall apart. Shabbos is the *klal*, the *nefesh*, the living soul of creation that holds it all together.

Just like Shabbos is the living soul of creation, Moshe was the soul of the Jewish People.

The Shem Mishmuel cites a *pasuk*: “*Sheish mei'os elef ragli ha'am asher anochi b'kirbo*. [There are] six hundred thousand people in this nation in whose midst I am” (Bamidbar 11:21). On a Chassidic/Kabbalistic level, *asher anochi b'kirbo* takes on a surprising meaning. Moshe said, “I am the life force of this people”; because of me they are one. The Ten Commandments are written in the singular form. *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*, I am Hashem, your God. Hashem addresses the Jewish People as if they are one person, because the Jewish People *is* one. Moshe's *neshama* and being gave them their focus and identity.

Moshe inspired a wonderful unity among the people, but it had a corresponding danger. If Moshe were to disappear, they could lose their unity.

Moshe's Argument with Hashem

The Midrash says that when Hashem was about to punish the Jews for the golden calf, Moshe objected, “But you commanded only me, not them. After all, *Anochi Hashem Elokecha* was commanded in singular” (see Rashi Shemos 20:2). How could Moshe make such a claim? Clearly, Hashem gave the Ten Commandments to the Jewish People as a whole!

The answer is that even though Hashem was talking to all of Israel, Moshe was the soul who received that command. “If anyone is responsible for the golden calf,” Moshe said, “It is me.” When the soul of Israel flew out of its body to go to the mountain to learn Torah in Heaven, it created a disconnect with the people below. The people felt they had lost their identity and unity. They splintered into many different factions. Some said, “Let’s stay loyal to Aharon and Chur.” Others said, “Let’s go back to Egypt,” and still others said, “Let’s make an idol.”

According to the Torah, when a person dies and the soul goes to heaven, the body becomes full of *tuma*. Evil energies enter the body to replace the holy soul. According to Chassidus, this is a fundamental phenomenon. When holiness leaves a place, the space is filled by *tuma*. The dead body of a Jew becomes defiled because it has lost the holiness of a Jewish soul. When Moshe’s soul left the Jewish People, the people lost their collective holy soul. It was then replaced by evil energies that wreaked havoc among the nation.

Aharon understood this better than anyone else. From day one, Aharon had partnered with Moshe Rabbeinu. He knew how much his presence meant to the people. And he knew how much damage was being caused by his absence. Aharon realized that the problem was that the people had lost their unity. He said, “We need to reunite. If we could only reestablish our unity and collective direction, we could get back on track.”

As Jews, if we think about our current situation in the world, we must realize how our disunity is wreaking havoc. We can't agree on fundamental things. Our people does not agree about the Land of Israel and the Jewish role there, about Judaism and democracy in Israel and America, or how to raise Jewish children. What should our attitudes be towards deviant behavior? There are major debates on the issues of marriage and divorce. There are many issues that drive us apart, and the resulting disunity causes us so much trouble.

Aharon was in the middle of this maelstrom. The people were splintering into factions, and Aharon wanted to reunite them. He fashioned the golden calf with this goal. He thought it would unify Bnei Yisrael in a good way.

The Shem Mishmuel refers to a letter written by Rav Aharon Chernobyl, one of the great Chassidic leaders. He wanted everyone in his community to contribute towards a certain cause. He wrote, "Don't think that I need the money. I have enough money to sponsor this cause on my own. But I want you all to be united. In supporting this cause, you will be united. I will need to pray for you, and when you are all united in this way, I will be able to effectively pray for you and bring your prayers together to heaven."

E

Money and Dreams

People want money; they dream and fantasize about what they would do with more of it. It represents people's wishes. Usually, people wish for good things. They say, "If only I would win the lottery with a 225-million-dollar jackpot—look at the great things I could do. I would take care of my wife and children. I would build hospitals for the sick. I would open centers for the poor and homeless to live in. All my great dreams would materialize if I only won the 225-million-dollar jackpot." Chassidus teaches that

money is not evil—it just depends on what you want to do with that money. If you have the right ideas, money is great.

Rav Aharon Chernobyler said, “All you people are asking me to pray for you. You, my follower, want a child; you, my follower, want health; you want to find a *shidduch*. Each person has so many different needs. The money we have represents those wishes and those needs. Let’s bring all our different desires and needs together. Let’s get involved in a unifying project, and then I will be able to unify your prayers.”

Aharon said everyone should give some gold towards what would become the *eigel*. As the most precious metal, gold contains people’s highest aspirations. By donating gold to a common cause, people give up their personal desires and merge them together with other people’s personal desires. Aharon received the gold from them and threw it into the fire.

The Shem Mishmuel cites an idea from the Ya’aros Devash of Rav Yonasan Eibshitz. Why is so much of our food cooked? We have to heat it up first before we can eat it. Why did Hashem make it this way? Rav Eibshitz explained that when Adam and Chava ate from the Eitz Hada’as, the snake—which had convinced them to eat—was able to poison the food with evil. Evil became part of the food that people eat. In the process of cooking, the heat of the fire purges the poison of the snake. Cooking doesn’t just prepare the food chemically and physically; it prepares it spiritually. Fire drives away the spiritual poison that has been there since the sin of Adam and Chava.

Fire has the power to purge evil and to purify. When people dig up gold and other precious metals from the ground, they use fire to clean out the dross. Fire can cause a painful purification, but it purifies nonetheless.

Aharon thought that when they put all their gold into the fire, they would understand that all their foolish wishes were being given away to the fire. The fire would purify their frantic wishes now

that Moshe was gone, and they would let Aharon help them get back to pure gold, to reestablish their Jewish unity.

If the people would have listened to him, he would have been successful. He would have formed the gold into a harmless golden thing that may even have inspired the people to return to God. But the Jewish People were not ready for that fire to remove the impurities. They were not ready to attain this single-minded dedication. They couldn't overcome the impure forces that filled the void Moshe had left behind. They identified the calf that emerged as an idol, and it became the catastrophic distortion of Judaism.

Moshe came down from the mountain with the power to reignite the Jewish People with his presence. He threw the calf into the fire, burned it, and purified the people with its ashes. After the calf episode, Moshe moved on to the *mitzva* of the Mishkan.

F

The Mishkan in the Aftermath of the Eigel

At this stage, the Mishkan needed a new context. Shabbos, the day of unity, provided that new context. Shabbos for the post-*eigel* Mishkan was not an afterthought. It was the necessary prelude to the Mishkan. Shabbos is the day when man and God are united in the "secret of one." When the people were united through Shabbos, they could stay together and build a Mishkan. At this point, if the Jews would fall into individuality, they would not be able to build a Mishkan. Accordingly, Shabbos here is mentioned before the Mishkan.

Moshe thus started by gathering the Jews together as a community. Shabbos is the key to the Jewish People's unity. It is the foundation for their ability to build a Mishkan, a holy place for Hashem in this world.

Moshe—Leader of a United People

In the end of his life, Moshe Rabbeinu died just like other people. His main efforts were to preserve Hashem's teaching for future generations. In many ways, we keep the memory of Moshe Rabbeinu alive. We read the Torah. Many *psukim* read, "*Vayedabeir Hashem el Moshe leimor*. Hashem spoke to Moshe to say." In this way, as we learn Torah today, Moshe Rabbeinu is still alive.

Shabbos is a time of unity just as the Mishkan is a place of unity. Even though the Beis Hamikdash has been destroyed, *Shechina eina beteila*, Hashem is still with us. Through the power of the Torah of Moshe, through the study and teaching of Torah, we have a sense that Moshe is still leading us. We have a sense of unity among the Jewish People.

Our prayer is that this united feeling of *ish echad b'lev echad*, of being a single identity of Am Yisrael through Shabbos, Torah, and the Beis Hamikdash and Yerushalayim, will spread to every Jew in the world. Moshe gathered us together with Vayakhel. He didn't want us to be divided into small factions. When we are united, we have the holiness of the Torah. The unity of Am Yisrael has to be related to Torah and *mitzvos* and especially to Shabbos.

We now can answer our other questions. The power of Shabbos to create unity among our people and with Hashem is greater than the power of the Mishkan, demonstrated by the fact that Shabbos is permanent whereas the Mishkan was destroyed. Thus, on Shabbos, we don't build the Mishkan.

Furthermore, the sweetness and holiness of Shabbos is more powerful than fire when it comes to purging evil and producing unity. It can succeed where fire failed. Therefore, the Torah here states the prohibition not to start fires on Shabbos, because Shabbos is the greatest of all spiritual fires.

Let us take inspiration from the unifying Mishkan. Our Shabbos can be the unifying factor among all of us. Let us keep

Shabbos and invite fellow Jews to our Shabbos table. Let us pray, sing, dance, and enjoy Shabbos together. Through the power of Shabbos, the Jewish People can become united again as one person with one heart, with the soul and teachings of Moshe Rabbeinu energizing and uniting us.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Conceptually, what is the difference between the *mitzva* of Mishkan before and after the *eigel*?
2. Why did Aharon make the *eigel*?
3. What spiritual role did Moshe play for the Jewish People?
4. What is the spiritual role of fire?
5. Why did Moshe gather the people to tell them the *mitzva* to build the Mishkan?
6. Which is a more powerful spiritual force—Mishkan or Shabbos? Explain.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. Do you feel isolated from or connected and united with people?
2. Explain when you experience these feelings.
3. How could you foster more unity with the people in your life?
4. Does Shabbos help you unite with other Jews? Why?

