

Parashat Vayakel, 5774, 2014:

Erev Shabbat (the Eve of Shabbat) and Mindfulness

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

In many ways, our *parasha* is a recapitulation of the commandment to collect the raw materials necessary to build the *Mishkan*, and the multifold steps involved in its construction. As a result, Moshe began our Torah portion with these well-known words: “Moses called the whole community of the children of Israel to assemble, and he said to them: ‘These are the things that the L-rd commanded to make.’” (*Sefer Shemot* 35:1, this and all Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). Following standard textual precedent, the following *pasukim* (verses) should have continued this subject and stated:

And Moses spoke to the entire community of the children of Israel, saying: “This is the word that the L-rd has commanded to say: ‘Take from yourselves an offering for the L-rd; every generous hearted person shall bring it, [namely] the L-rd's offering: gold, silver, and copper ...’” (*Ibid.* , 4-5)

Instead, Hashem, in His infinite wisdom, interpolated the following two Shabbat-themed verses in between verses one and four, and thereby interrupted what would have been the normal stylistic flow:

Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have sanctity, a day of complete rest to the L-rd; whoever performs work thereon [on this day] shall be put to death. You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwelling places on the Sabbath day. (*Ibid.* , 2-3)

Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on the explanations of *Midrash Mechilta* and *Talmud Bavli*, *Shabbat* 70a on our verses, explains the seemingly out of place discussion of Shabbat in the following fashion:

Six days: He [Moses] prefaced [the discussion of the details of] the work of the Mishkan with the warning to keep the Sabbath, denoting that it [i.e., the work of the Mishkan] does not supersede the Sabbath.

You shall not kindle fire: Some of our Rabbis say that [the prohibition of] kindling was singled out for a [mere] negative commandment, while others say that it was singled out to separate [all types of labor].

In essence, Rashi makes two very well-defined observations:

- 1) The *melacha* (creative activity) involved in constructing the *Mishkan* does not take precedence over the Torah's command of *shemirat Shabbat* (the obligation to refrain from all proscribed labor on the Sabbath).
- 2) At the very least, the specific mention of kindling a fire on Shabbat indicates that it constitutes a negative prohibition. Alternatively, it can be viewed as representative of all manner and variety of forbidden labor.

What emerges from the Torah's placement of our Shabbat-themed verses in the midst of the *mitzvah* to construct the *Mishkan* is now quite clear: Nothing, not even building a "House for Hashem," may contravene the obligation of *shemirat Shabbat*. This speaks volumes about the fundamental role of Shabbat in the psyche of the Jew, and its consequent overriding significance within the Halacha (Jewish Law). Perhaps Ahad Ha'Am (Asher Tzvi Hirsch Ginzberg, 1856-1927) said it best when he declared: "More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews."

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, often spoke about *kedushat hayom* (the holiness of the day) in reference to both Shabbat and the Festivals. In doing so, he joined many other

distinguished Torah scholars throughout Jewish history. The Rav, however, emphasized halakhic feeling, rather than just the cognitive gesture, more so than many of his predecessors:

... When we shift our attention from halakhic thinking to halakhic feeling, from halakhic topics to axiological themata, we suddenly find ourselves in a new dimension, namely that of *kedushah*, holiness. Suddenly the Sabbath is transmuted or transformed from an abstract norm, from a formal concept, into a “reality,” a living essence, a living entity; from a discipline in accordance with which one acts compulsorily into a great experience which one acts out spontaneously. (*Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition*, page 90, David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler, editors)

In all likelihood, however, Rabbi Soloveitchik made his most singular contribution to understanding Shabbat in our time when he focused upon its immediate antecedent, namely, *erev Shabbat*:

Even in those neighborhoods made up predominantly of religious Jews, one can no longer talk of the ‘sanctity of Shabbat.’ True, there are Jews in America who observe Shabbat... But it is not for Shabbat that my heart aches; it is for the forgotten *erev Shabbat* (eve of the Sabbath). There are Shabbat-observing Jews in America, but there are no *erev Shabbat* Jews who go out to greet Shabbat with beating hearts and pulsating souls. There are many who observe the precepts with their hands, with their feet, and/or with their mouths - but there are few indeed who truly know the meaning of the service of the heart (*On Repentance*, pp. 97-98, Rabbi Pinchas Peli editor and translator)

According to the Rav, *erev Shabbat* has much to do with the internal spiritual longings and cravings of man that seem to have become truncated and all but shattered in our modern age. What are the causes for the spiritual loss of *erev Shabbat*? Perhaps the answer is to be found in the Rav’s general conceptualization of 20th century religious life:

Much of this is due to the current religious atmosphere, suffused with shallow pragmatism; much is caused by the tendency towards the ceremonialization - and, at times, the vulgarization - of religion; and much is brought about by the lack of a serious ability to introspect and to assess the world and the spirit. (“*Al Ahavat Ha-Torah U-ge’ulat Nefesh Ha-dor*,” p. 419, translation, Rabbi Ronnie Ziegler, <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/rav/rav10.htm>)

Clearly for Rabbi Soloveitchik, we live at a time in Jewish history wherein it is crucial for us to once again embrace the joy and beauty of *erev Shabbat* and greet the Shabbat Queen “with beating hearts and pulsating souls.” This can only be achieved, however, if we attempt to create, within the deepest recesses of our being, “[the] serious ability to introspect and to assess the world and the spirit.” How can we translate this abstract and essentially cognitively-based statement of the Rav into practical every day terms so that it can serve as a framework for authentic religious change? In some ways, perhaps, the answer lies in developing the quality of mindfulness.

Dr. Ellen Langer, Ph.D., is a social psychologist and a tenured professor in the Psychology Department at Harvard University. She is the author of eleven books and more than two hundred research articles written for general and academic readers on mindfulness over a period of 35 years (<http://www.ellenlanger.com/about/>). Dr. Langer identifies five different mindfulness steps that lead to increased happiness and vitality. Two of these steps (underlined), it seems, may be readily applied to our *erev Shabbat* and overall Shabbat experiences:

- 1) Seek out, create, and notice new things: If we apply this to *erev Shabbat*, this means we need to embrace each Shabbat as a new and exciting experience and an island in time wherein we can be potentially transformed by its presence.
- 2) Be authentic: We need to focus upon our honest feelings as we encounter the Shabbat Queen. True, Shabbat offers palpable relief from the normal hyper-technology-infused hustle and stress of our lives; yet, it can be so much more. Therefore, it is precisely in this arena that we must apply ourselves so that Shabbat can be more than the mere cessation from *melacha* and, instead, become the realm of authentic and creative spiritual energy.

With Hashem's help, and our renewed dedication and determination, may we become more mindful, and thereby more spiritual, in our weekly *erev Shabbat* and Shabbat experiences. May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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