

# JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

## Ki Tisa

The flow of the Torah's thinking in the beginning of this week's parsha is a bit puzzling. First we are introduced to the chief architect of the Mishkan, the talented Betzalel. The Torah reiterates every component of the Mishkan and instructs Betzalel and his team to put their creative artistry into the creation of each piece. Surprisingly, this is immediately followed by the mitzvah of the Shabbat: "But keep My Shabbats. It is a sign between Me and you for all generations, to make you realize that I, G-d, am making you holy...The Israelites shall thus keep the Shabbat, making it a day of rest for all generations, as an eternal covenant" (Shemot 31:13,16). What does Shabbat have to do with the building of the Mishkan?

This juxtaposition of the Mishkan with Shabbat is not at all coincidental. Our tradition tells us that when the Torah prohibits "work" on the Shabbat (31:14,15) it is speaking of exactly the same type of work that was just referred to in the construction of the Mishkan a few verses earlier (see Shabbat 49b). Basically, there were thirty nine different actions needed to construct the Mishkan. These are the categories of work that we are to rest from on the Shabbat (Mishnah Shabbat 7:2).

Let's take a close look at the thirty nine acts of Mishkan construction. They seem to divide neatly into three sets. The first set contains all the actions necessary to produce the natural dyes for the Mishkan. It starts from the very beginning: plowing, planting, harvesting, etc. The second set contains all the actions necessary to produce the woven and leather curtains of the Mishkan. This set includes two different processes: the process of creating woolen textiles, and the process of curing hides. In the final set we have the acts of construction itself. Stated differently, these thirty nine actions are about the production of food, clothing, and shelter. These are the essential acts of human survival. This is what we are being told not do on the Shabbat.

"It is a sign between Me and the Israelites that during the six weekdays G-d made heaven and earth, but on Saturday, He ceased working and He rested" (31:17). Shabbat is a sign (that is, a reminder) of G-d's creation of the world as well as his continuous caring for and support of his creation. During six weekdays G-d made heaven and earth. During the six weekdays we engage in the essential acts of human survival, providing for our food, clothing, and shelter. On Saturday, G-d rested. On the Shabbat, we take a break from our involvement with our work. Shabbat is a weekly reminder that we are in the Hands of G-d, the Creator and Provider of our world. We may think that we are taking care of ourselves, but ultimately it is G-d who is taking care of us. We can take our minds off our work. We can relax; we are in good hands.

There is a fundamental relationship between Shabbat and the Mishkan that still needs to be explained. What is the significance of the fact that the work that we are to refrain from on the Shabbat is the same as the acts of Mishkan construction? What is the underlying message here?



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(As with all “why” questions it is important to remember that we can never really know the Mind of G-d. We call Him G-d for a reason. However, we cannot overlook our duty to struggle with the text and glean as much insight as possible. The classic commentators have offered numerous answers to this question. Our own thoughts are of course no more than a humble suggestion.)

The Mishkan is a home for the Divine Presence here on Earth. If G-d’s Presence can rest in a building, it must certainly be able to enter the heart of a Jew. As the Malbim (1809-1879) writes, “We should all build a personal sanctuary for the Divine Presence within the halls of our hearts” (Shemot 25:8). In other words, the Mishkan represents the potential of man. It follows that the construction of the Mishkan must symbolize the spiritual construction of our selves.

Of course, the primary tools a Jew utilizes in the construction of his personal Mishkan are the mitzvot. However, we do not build with mitzvot alone. The acts of Mishkan construction are basic acts, not mitzvot. We will merit the Presence of the Shechina only when all our actions, even the most basic and mundane, are beautiful and holy. During the six weekdays when we conduct our activities with honesty, decency, and integrity we are simultaneously building our spiritual selves, our inner Mishkan.

However, on the Shabbat we do not engage in construction, not even the construction of the self. On the Shabbat we are complete. Our Mishkan is built and the Shechina has arrived. Now is not the time to build; now is the time to enjoy the awareness of our spiritual selves and the holiness of the Shabbat day.

“But keep My Shabbats. It is a sign between Me and you for all generations, to make you realize that I, G-d, am making you holy” (31:13). The great Jewish thinker from the Golden Age of Tzefat, Rabbi Moshe Alshich (1521-1593) expounds on this verse, “Don’t make the mistake of thinking that Shabbat is just a vacation from work. What is meant by its being a “sign” is that Shabbat is an inner bond that connects man with the Shechina... On the Shabbat, man is a sanctuary for G-d.”

Shabbat Shalom.

JSN Parsha Team

