

## **VaYakhel & Pikudei – 5783**

At the very end of last week's parsha, Ki Tissa, HaShem addresses the essential elements of the Jewish calendar just before Moshe comes down from Mount Sinai radiating as a result of his encounter with the divine. While he reviews elements of the Shalosh Regalim, the three Harvest Festivals, in the briefest terms, he reinforces the commandment to honour the Sabbath Day which is one of the Ten Commandments. Although it is another whole parsha later, in the text it appears only a few verses later but again, at the beginning of this week's parsha, this time Moshe reminds the assembled People of Israel that HaShem has commanded his people to observe the Sabbath Day to keep it holy by not doing any work and by making it different from the rest of the days of the week.

Why is it necessary to be reminded yet again that on six days HaShem created the world and on the seventh day he rested, and so too should his people rest from their work? Why is the Shabbat and its observance reinforced so many times throughout the Torah? How is it that we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can still look back and posit that, without a doubt the Shabbat kept the Jewish people as much as the Jewish people kept the Shabbat over the last 2500 years? What meaning does it have for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century when so many of the restrictions against work on the Shabbat have next to no meaning today?

To begin to try and answer that question, let's ask ourselves and remind ourselves what sorts of work the Talmud restricted on the Shabbat. In the whole of today's double parsha and in the parshiot that occurred earlier in the book of Exodus, we have been told about the building of the mishkan and the investiture of Aaron and his sons as the priests of the people, the Cohanim in a long line of Cohanim that can self-identify even today through DNA believe it or not. The Talmud dictated that any work that was involved in the building of the mishkan and any parts of that work were forbidden on the Shabbat. If we look at it from an historical point of view, it makes sense that anything that was involved in building and creating would be restricted 2500 years ago. But how does that figure into things like driving our cars, using our technologies whatever they might be, cooking and baking using all the tools we have at our disposal today. None of them qualify in the slightest way with what we in today's world would consider work. Yet, the rabbis dictate that we cannot flick a light switch or turn an ignition switch.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel suggested to the Jewish People that the Shabbat was supposed to be a window in time, a 26-hour period in our otherwise busy lives. But to what end? One of the divrei Torah that I access most weeks argued that the clue to these questions lay in the end of last week's Parsha when Moshe came down from Sinai with his skin glowing from his encounter with HaShem. In our prayers on

Shabbat, we pray that after our davening, our skin might also reflect the radiance that Moshe derived from his encounter with HaShem on Sinai. So many of us have reduced the Shabbat to candles before sundown, blessing our children, saying the kiddush and the moitze and sitting down to a table dressed in white with our finest china and silver and crystal and devouring a traditional Shabbat meal prepared to perfection. Research has shown time and time again that the lighting of Shabbat Candles is one of the singular defining characteristics of the Jewish people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But that cannot be the end of the observances.

I had the great fortune to spend many a Shabbat weekend at Camp Ramah in Utterson, Ontario where our Noah and Rebecca spent their summers for many years. As the sun sank in the sky, the campers engaged in cleaning their cabins, dressing in the Shabbat whites, sitting quietly on the grass surrounding the migrash or playing field. The cars carrying visitors and spouses of counsellors up to camp would come racing in before they closed for Shabbat. But then everyone would walk to the large makom, or prayer area overlooking Skeleton Lake and sit quietly waiting for services to begin. There is something indefinable about the feeling of 400 or 500 people davening together and welcoming the Shabbat Queen.

After services everyone would walk into the dining hall, fill the tables, and sing at the top of their voices until one table at a time they

would go to the taps along the side and wash their hands and come and sit down ceasing to talk completely before all 500 or so campers and staff had completed their task. The one time in the week when there was total silence in a very large dining hall. Then Moitze would be recited, and everyone would sing together Shabbat Shalom. As I look back, that was the moment when the radiance of Hashem graced the dining hall and everyone in it.

Shabbat is not just the rituals of a family sitting down together although that is crucial to our survival as a people. It is also davening together and recognizing the role of HaShem in our lives. Shabbat only becomes a window in time when we take the time to daven together, to study Torah together, to sing together and raise our voices in praise of our maker and glory in that which we share, a history and a culture and a faith that has protected us and kept us whole despite all that the world has thrown our way in the 2500 years since the encounter between Moshe and HaShem at Sinai.

It is not coincidence that the rest of the book of Shemot that follows the first few verses of this week's Parsha deal with the details of the mishkan. It was the Mekom or place where HaShem could best be found for the Israelites then. Our synagogues are those places today,

I want to conclude with a reference to the devotion of the Jewish people to Shabbat that has emerged as we have moved from the 20<sup>th</sup> into

the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most of you know that in 1492, Spain expelled its Jewish citizens as part of the inquisition. While many Spanish Jews moved south into Africa and east into Central Europe, many chose to remain behind and hid themselves and their Jewish roots. They outwardly passed as converts to Catholicism but inwardly many kept the traditions of their faith. What was it that they carried forward into the 20<sup>th</sup> century? They made Friday different from all the other days of the week. They lit candles, used white tablecloths, changed their clothes, and made special meals. Honour the Sabbath Day to Make it holy. We do not have to hide ourselves but in honour of those who came before us, we must remember that Shabbat is the day in which we honour our faith and our peoplehood not just with a chicken dinner but with prayer and contemplation so that the radiance of HaShem can be found on our persons just like it was on Moshe.