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# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

## Covenant & Conversation

At the beginning of Vayakhel Moses performs a tikkun, a mending of the past, namely the sin of the Golden Calf. The Torah signals this by using essentially the same word at the beginning of both episodes. It eventually became a key word in Jewish spirituality: k-h-l, "to gather, assemble, congregate." From it we get the words kahal and kehillah, meaning "community". Far from being merely an ancient concern, it remains at the heart of our humanity. As we will see, recent scientific research confirms the extraordinary power of communities and social networks to shape our lives.

First, the biblical story. The episode of the Golden Calf began with these words: "When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered themselves [vayikahel] around Aaron …" (Ex. 32:1). At the beginning of this week's parsha, having won G-d's forgiveness and brought down a second set of tablets, Moses began the work of rededicating the people: "Moses assembled [vayakhel] the entire Israelite congregation …" (Ex. 35:1). They had sinned as a community. Now they were about to be reconstituted as a community. Jewish spirituality is first and foremost a communal spirituality.

Note too exactly what Moses does in this week's parsha. He directs their attention to the two great centres of community in Judaism, one in space, the other in time. The one in time is Shabbat. The one in space was the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, that led eventually to the Temple and later to the synagogue. These are where kehillah lives most powerfully: on Shabbat when we lay aside our private devices and desires and come together as a community, and the synagogue, where community has its home.

Judaism attaches immense significance to the individual. Every life is like a universe. Each one of us, though we are all in G-d's image, is different, therefore unique and irreplaceable. Yet the first time the words "not good" appear in the Torah are in the verse, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). Much of Judaism is about the shape and structure of our togetherness. It values the individual but does not endorse individualism.

Ours is a religion of community. Our holiest prayers can only be said in the presence of a minyan, the minimum definition of a community. When we pray, we do so as a community. Martin Buber spoke of I-and-Thou, but Judaism is really a matter of We-and-Thou. Hence, to atone for the sin the Israelites committed as a community, Moses sought to consecrate community in time and place.

This has become one of the fundamental differences between tradition and the contemporary culture of the West. We can trace this in the titles of three landmark books about American society. In 1950, David Riesman, Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney published an insightful book about the changing character of Americans, called The Lonely Crowd. In 2000 Robert Putnam of Harvard published Bowling Alone, an account of how more Americans than ever were going ten-pin bowling but fewer were joining bowling clubs and leagues. In 2011, Sherry Turkle of MIT published a book on the impact of smartphones and social networking software called Alone Together.

Listen to those titles. They are each about the advancing tide of loneliness, successive stages in the long, extended breakdown of community in modern life. Robert Bellah put it eloquently when he wrote that "social ecology is damaged not only by war, genocide and political repression. It is also damaged by the destruction of the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another, leaving them frightened and alone.[1]

That is why the two themes of Vayakhel – Shabbat and the Mishkan, today the synagogue – remain powerfully contemporary. They are antidotes to the attenuation of community. They help restore "the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another." They reconnect us to community.

Consider Shabbat. Michael Walzer, the Princeton political philosopher, draws attention to the difference between holidays and holy days (or as he



[1] Robert Bellah et al., Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1985, 284.

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puts it, between vacations and Shabbat).[2] The idea of a vacation as a private holiday is relatively recent. Walzer dates it to the 1870s. Its essence is its individualist (or familial) character. "Everyone plans his own vacation, goes where he wants to go, does what he wants to do." Shabbat, by contrast, is essentially collective: "you, your son and daughter, your male and female servant, your ox, your donkey, your other animals, and the stranger in your gates." It is public, shared, the property of us all. A vacation is a commodity. We buy it. Shabbat is not something we buy. It is available to each on the same terms: "enjoined for everyone, enjoyed by everyone." We take vacations as individuals or families. We celebrate Shabbat as a community.

Something similar is true about the synagogue – the Jewish institution, unique in its day, that was eventually adopted by Christianity and Islam in the form of the church and mosque. We noted above Robert Putnam's argument in Bowling Alone, that Americans were becoming more individualistic. There was a loss, he said, of "social capital," that is, the ties that bind us together in shared responsibility for the common good.

A decade later, Putnam revised his thesis.[3] Social capital, he said, still exists, and you can find it in churches and synagogues. Regular attendees at a place of worship were – so his research showed – more likely than others to give money to charity, engage in voluntary work, donate blood, spend time with someone who is depressed, offer a seat to a stranger, help find someone a job, and many other measures of civic, moral and philanthropic activism. They are, quite simply, more public spirited than others. Regular attendance at a house of worship is the most accurate predictor of altruism, more so than any other factor, including gender, education, income, race, region, marital status, ideology and age.

Most fascinating of his findings is that the key factor is being part of a religious community. What turned out not to be relevant is what you believe. The research findings suggest that an atheist who goes regularly to a house of worship (perhaps to accompany a spouse or a child) is more likely to volunteer in a soup kitchen than a fervent believer who prays alone. The key factor again is community.

This may well be one of the most important functions of religion in a secular age, namely, keeping community alive. Most of us need community. We are social animals. Evolutionary biologists have suggested recently that the huge increase in brain size represented by Homo sapiens was specifically to allow us to form more extended social networks. It is the human capacity to co-operate in large teams – rather than the power of reason – that marks us off from other animals. As the Torah says, it is not good to be alone.

Recent research has shown something else as well. Who you associate with has a powerful impact on what you do and become. In 2009 Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler did statistical analysis of a group of 5,124 subjects and their 53,228 ties to friends family and work colleagues. They found that if a friend takes up smoking, it makes it significantly more likely (by 36 per cent) that you will. The same applies to drinking, slenderness, obesity, and many other behavioural patterns.[4] We become like the people we are close to.

A study of students at Dartmouth College in the year 2000 found that if you share a room with someone with good study habits, it will probably raise your own performance. A 2006 Princeton study showed that if your sibling has a child, it makes it 15 per cent more likely that you will within the next two years. There is such a thing as "social contagion". We are profoundly influenced by our friends – as indeed Maimonides states in his law code, the Mishneh Torah (Laws of Character Traits, 6:1).

Which brings us back to Moses and Vayakhel. By placing community at the heart of the religious life and by giving it a home in space and time – the synagogue and Shabbat – Moses was showing the power of community for good, as the episode of the Golden Calf had shown its power for bad. Jewish spirituality is for the most part profoundly communal. Hence my definition of Jewish faith: the redemption of our solitude. 

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

# Shabbat Forshpeis

The last two portions of the Book of Exodus apply and repeat information found in previous passages of the Torah. In Parshat VaYakhel, the Tabernacle is constructed in its detail following the prescriptions found in the portion of Terumah. In the portion of

[2] Michael Walzer, Spheres of Justice, Oxford, Blackwell, 1983, 190-196.

[3] Robert Putnam and David E. Campbell, American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010.

[4] Nicholas Christakis and James H. Fowler, Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives. New York: Little, Brown, 2009.

Pikudei, the priestly garments are made again following the details laid out earlier in the portion of Tetzaveh.

Why is it that the Torah needs to repeat every detail when describing the making of the Tabernacle and the garments? Wouldn't it have been enough for the Torah to simply say that the Temple was constructed and the garments were made as G-d had commanded?

Several reasons for repetition can be suggested. First, the Torah may want to make the very point that the commands were followed in great detail. Presenting the details of the law shows that nothing mandated by G-d was overlooked.

Another possibility is that presenting the details again points to a loving involvement in this process. Each step in making the Tabernacle and the garments was an expression of the love that Moshe (Moses) and the people felt towards G-d.

But for me, the answer to our question may lie in considering the sequence of events in the latter part of Exodus. The portion of Terumah deals with the command to make the Tabernacle. Tetzaveh follows with the command of the priestly garments. Immediately following these portions, the importance of Shabbat is mentioned in the portion of Ki Tisa.

Not coincidentally, the portion of Vayakhel, which follows Ki Tisa, mentions Shabbat at its very beginning. The building of the Tabernacle, found in Vayakhel, and the making of the garments, found in Pikudei, then follow. The sequence is truly a mirror opposite with one notable exception. Whereas the command of Tabernacle and priestly garments was followed by Shabbat, in the actual implementation of the laws, Shabbat comes first.

In Judaism, there are two sanctities, the sanctity of place and the sanctity of time. As important as place may be, time is of even greater importance. Perhaps then, it can be suggested that the reason why the Torah repeats the commandments in details is to point out that Shabbat, the epitome of the sanctity of time, is even more important than the sanctity of space represented by the Tabernacle and the garments.

In his book "The Sabbath," Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel points out that the acquisition of "space," is an appropriate human quest. But life goes wrong when one spends all of his/her time to amass "things." "For to have more, does not mean to be more."

It is interesting to note that the incident that falls between the command and the implementation is the sin of the Golden Calf. The keruvim, the angelic forms atop the Ark were holy objects; the Golden Calf which the Jews may have seen as a replacement was a defiling of place.

Precisely because of this perversion of the sanctity of space, the Torah deems it important to repeat the whole sequence, but to place Shabbat first so that its spirit be infused in every detail of the construction of the Tabernacle and making of the priestly garments. This teaches that ultimately we are people who carve out our empires in time and not in space.  *Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.*

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

# Wein Online

This week's parsha deals at its onset with the holiness of Shabbat. The Torah also emphasizes that this subject and concept was dealt with b'hakhel – publicly and nationally. We may derive an instructive lesson from this – a lesson that has much current relevance in our present society. There are two aspects of Shabbat – one public and one private.

The private Shabbat has a more active, positive nature attached to it. It is more in the nature of zachor – the remembrances of Shabbat: of kiddush wine, sumptuous meals and the leisurely rest combined with Torah study. But there is also a public aspect of Shabbat that the opening words of this week's parsha represent.

It is the concept of a public day of rest - a day of shamor – a time of restraint and the absence of the everyday hustle and bustle of commercial and daily life. It is meant to mark what is absent on this day from what we are accustomed to seeing and experiencing. The blessings of public quiet, of shuttered shops and the serenity of Friday nights and Saturday afternoons are the hallmarks of the public Shabbat.

The public Shabbat – the shamor Shabbat, if you will – stands guard to protect the private Shabbat, safeguarding its observance and guaranteeing its survival and holiness. It is not for naught that the Talmud states that zachor and shamor were uttered at Sinai, so to speak, simultaneously in one sound breath. The success of Shabbat can only be realized when both the public and private Shabbat are present together.

For various reasons and differing causes, the public Shabbat has been drastically weakened in much of the Jewish world over the past century. Even those who claim to wish to preserve the private Shabbat, often desecrate the public Shabbat. The result of that error is clear to see today, for where there is no presence of a public Shabbat there will eventually be no private one either.

The fact that the stores in Jerusalem are closed on Shabbat and that the public busses and trains do not operate on that day is admittedly inconvenient to some or even to many. But the mere absence of these usual everyday factors in our lives creates for us at least the semblance of a public Shabbat and therefore

has facilitated the slow but steady growth and strength of the private Shabbat.

The absence of the ordinary always reminds us of the extraordinary. A non-Jewish tourist asked for a freshly brewed cup of coffee at the Jerusalem hotel where she was staying on Shabbat morning. The solicitous Arab waiter explained to her that he could not comply with her wishes since it was Shabbat. She persisted in her request until the waiter told her in exasperation: "Madam, this is the holy city!"

It is the Shabbat, both public and private that reminds us where we are and what type of life we are bidden to follow while being privileged to live here. The Shabbat will continue to protect Jerusalem just as Jerusalem will continue to protect the Shabbat. 

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

# Shabbat Shalom

Six days physically creative activities shall be done but the seventh day shall be holy for you, a Sabbath of Sabbaths for the Lord (of love)…; you shall not kindle a fire in all of your habitations on the Sabbath day' (Ex. 35:23) Why can't I go on Facebook on Shabbat or text my friend? I understand that it is forbidden for me to get involved in a physically exacting activating such as bricklaying or even working an eight-hour day in the office, but what kind of work is involved in a simple SMS communication to a friend? Is not such human communication the very purpose of Shabbat rest? There certainly is not even a hint of "kindling a fire," nor even the creation of a spark or the turning on of a light, in sending an SMS: So why is it forbidden? These are the questions I am receiving from more and more of the youngsters who are part of our age of the Internet.

What is the proper response? A careful study of these opening verses to this week's portion of Vayakhel clearly teaches that Shabbat is more than a respite from the physical activities in which we are engaged during the rest of the week, is more than a welcome day of physical rest from a six-day work week of physical exertion. Yes, it is also that, and for most of humanity for most of human history, that in itself was a critical necessity towards making life much more livable and enjoyable. But if that were to be the whole point of Shabbat, then one could spend it comfortably relaxing in bed without any activity whatsoever. And that is not what the biblical text is teaching when it states, "The seventh day shall be holy for you, a Sabbath of Sabbaths [Shabbaton, a special day of more than physical rest] for the Lord [of love]," a sacred day dedicated to G-d on High and not only to the comfort of your aching body! This point is clearly made by Nahmanides in his biblical commentary (Ramban on Leviticus 23:24), in which he explains the word Shabbaton, when used in the context of Rosh Hashana, to mean that in addition to the negative prohibition of work (melacha) on Shabbat there must be also a positive biblical commandment for a positive and recognizable expression of Shabbat menuha (spiritual activity which can be accomplished on the one day in which the individual is freed from his usual necessary weekday toil), a day dedicated to G-d. He adds that the word Shabbaton applies this positive principle for every Shabbat and Festival.

Maimonides derives this very same positive biblical commandment from the words in the Decalogue regarding the Sabbath day "in order that your gentile manservant and maidservant shall rest like you" (Deut. 5:14)—a positive, spiritual rest which ought to apply to all of humanity! Hence there is a biblical command (Shabbaton or L'ma'an yanuah) not to engage in an activity on Shabbat which is identified with work-related activities during the week (like using the telephone or text messaging).

But it is even a good deal more than that. If you study the second Mishna in the seventh chapter of Tractate Shabbat, you will see that the very order of the listed 39 forbidden creative activities go from the production of bread to the production of garments to the production of leather to the acts of building structures.

In effect, the Mishna is teaching that although it is legitimate to provide for the basic necessities of human existence—food, clothing and shelter—during the six workdays of the week, Shabbat must remind us of the essence and purpose of human life: to communicate with our family members and with our community members, to make sensitive and sentient contact with the glories of nature surrounding us (the G-d without) and with the "soul of life" (nishmat haim) inspirited within us (the G-d within). Shabbat is a day put aside for reflecting upon and for expressing the very purpose of our being, the "why" for which I am living, rather than the how to continue to exist as comfortably as possible.

Indeed, our generation has more human communication but less real communication than ever before.

We constantly text message but before we can read what came a minute ago, two more new messages have already arrived. We "see" what our "friend" has written, yet we do not hear the sound of his voice, which reflects his truest inner feelings. I recently read about a young girl who invited her 500 Facebook "friends" to her birthday party and not one of them showed up. I can be in an important meeting with a colleague or employee, but our eyes never make contact; he is looking down at the new messages entering his cellphone. A few weeks ago, I saw a

newly-minted bride and groom eating "together" at a restaurant, he on his phone and she on her phone; they were not speaking to each other! Shabbat provides the opportunity to "plug out" for one day a week in order to more successfully "plug-in" the other six days; without that Shabbat respite, you just may become "plugged-up." 

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

# Taking a Closer Look

"And every man whose heart raised him came, and all whose spirit motivated him brought what was donated to G-d for the work of the Tent of Meeting and for all of its service and for the holy garments" (Sh'mos 25:21). Targum Yonasan translates "all whose spirit motivated him" as "all whose spirit was completed with the prophecy that was with him" Similarly, when Moshe told the nation that Betzalel was chosen by G-d, who "filled him with the divine spirit" (25:31), Targum Yonasan translates "spirit" as "the spirit of prophecy." We can understand why Betzalel needed "the spirit of prophecy" to build the Mishkan exactly the way it was intended, as there were aspects of the instructions that Moshe gave him that were either incomplete (see Ramban on 36:8 and Chizkuni on 36:38; see also http://tinyurl.com/or57cet), or were given to him in the wrong order (see B'rachos 55a). But why would those who donated the materials for the Mishkan need prophecy? Weren't they told exactly which materials to donate? What was the purpose of the prophecy experienced by those who donated materials (as opposed to those who built it)?

A simplistic answer might be that a person who had several materials that were on the list of things to be donated needed help deciding which one(s) to donate, and/or how much of each to donate. However, I am uncomfortable with the notion that a person would experience prophecy just to help determine precisely what to donate and/or how much. Was prophecy used to help the undecided make their decisions, rather than to attain a deeper spiritual awareness? Since they were of a "donating spirit," why would they have held back from giving anything that could be used for the Mishkan? There were more donations than needed (36:5-6), so if anything, help was needed to decide what not to donate. (Any decision regarding what to donate must, by definition, include what not to donate.) Was prophecy used as a tool to help them figure out which materials that they owned and could be donated shouldn't be? [It would be quite awkward if the prophecy experienced by those having a "donating spirit" meant they used their prophecy in order to donate less than they otherwise would have, especially since the expression is presented as if prophecy helped them donate rather than helped them curtail their donation.]

When the donations were requested (35:5), there was only one expression used, "donating hearts," the same expression used in the initial commandment (25:2). It is only when the actual donations were made that two distinct groups were described, those who donated because "their heart lifted them," and those who donated because "their spirit motivated them." [The commentators say that it is this dual expression that led Targum Yonasan to explain the latter to be referring to experiencing prophecy.] The term "donating heart" is used again when the specific donations are mentioned (35:22 and 35:29), while the term "uplifted hearts" is used to describe the women who spun the goat's hair into threads (35:26). It would therefore seem that the term "donating heart" covers both those whose "heart was uplifted" and those with a "donating spirit," so is used to refer to all the donations, while each specific term, which is a subset of those with a "donating heart," refers to specific individuals within the larger group. The question remains, though, as to what function prophecy had for those who had a "donating spirit" as opposed to just a "heart that raised them."

When an appeal is made for funds (or materials), donations can be made simply because there is a general need, or because those who donate want to make sure a specific need is filled. For example, if a synagogue has a deficit, it is very generous of anyone who donates to help cover the deficit, while one who pledges to cover a specific item in the budget (say, covering the costs of the coffee and refreshments available to those who participate in synagogue functions, or to replace the air conditioning system) has a more direct connection with that budgetary item than had the same amount of money been donated without designating it to go towards that specific item. Even though the amount the deficit is reduced by is the same whether the money is donated to the general fund or to a specific item, by identifying a particular area where the money is to be applied, there is often a more palpable relationship with the synagogue than had the funds been given towards the deficit as a whole. Donating a majestic Aron Kodesh can bring about a different feeling when davening in that sanctuary than donating the same amount of money, even if the synagogue's trustees decide to use the donated money to buy that same majestic Aron Kodesh. All voluntary donations come from a "donating heart," which is "raised" through the process of donating to a worthy cause, but a "donating spirit" has a vision of what he or she thinks needs to be accomplished, and does whatever he or she can to make that vision a reality.

The "appeal" for the Mishkan wasn't one asking for money to be donated so that the materials necessary to build it can be purchased, but for the materials themselves to be donated, and for workers to donate their time and energy. Those who donated did

so in order that there would be a Mishkan within which G-d's divine presence would dwell. There were some who tried to visualize how the specific materials they were donating would contribute to creating a physical space for G-d's presence to dwell within; it wasn't just their "hearts" that were part of the donation process, but their very essence, their "spirit." Even though the same materials could be donated without trying to better understand how they would be used, a more direct connection to the Mishkan was created by those who put more thought into what they were donating and its specific impact.

"It is possible for a prophecy to only be for the benefit of the prophet himself, to expand his heart and to increase his knowledge to the extent that he will know, regarding great matters, what he hadn't known" (Rambam, Hilchos Y'soday HaTorah 7:7). [Note how the Rambam says "great matters," not just to help make decisions.] Was it necessary for those who donated to experience prophecy in order for the Mishkan to be built? Not necessarily. Did it add to the holiness of the Mishkan that some who donated made a stronger connection with it by trying to visualize what it would be like? Absolutely. And those who did were rewarded by being able to visualize it through prophecy, "expanding their [donating] hearts" and allowing them to understand things that they otherwise could not have fully understood.

When the Torah tells us that whoever had a "donating heart" contributed materials for the Mishkan, it also tells us that some had a "donating spirit," with Targum Yonasan explaining that they experienced prophecy in order to enable them to visualize how the materials they were donating would manifest themselves in a structure within which G-d's divine presence would dwell. *© 2016 Rabbi D. Kramer*

**RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ**

# Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states with regard to Betzalel, the artisan in charge of creating the Mishkan (Portable Sanctuary), that the Almighty filled him with wisdom, insight and knowledge: "...and to think thoughts to make with gold and with silver and with brass" (Exodus 35:32).

What can this verse teach us about our own lives?

There are two types of skillful artisans. The first type of craftsman is one who is able to picture new designs in his mind. His fertile imagination enables him to create original works of art. This, wrote Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, is what the present verse is expressing. "And to think thoughts," that is, Betzalel had the ability to visualize entirely new artistic creations.

The second type is an expert in making fancy vessels with intricate designs though he may not be creative or original. After he sees what someone else has done, he learns to make similar things -- perhaps even better than the original designer.

Our lesson: One does not need to be a Betzalel to serve the Almighty. Whatever abilities the Almighty has blessed you with can be utilized for the honor of the Almighty. Whatever your talents, use them to help and teach others. You will live an honored life! *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin*
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**RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON**

# Perceptions

"Moshe called the entire community of the Children of Israel to assemble..." Shemos 35:1 Now that adar rishon is coming to an end, b"H, Purim is officially on its way. This week's parshah is last week's parshah, that is, the Maftir is the first of the four special ones for this time of year: Parashas Shekalim. And, being a Jewish leap, Vayakhel gets to have the Shabbos all to itself.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh asks why it was necessary to specify that Moshe gathered together the Jewish people to hear what he had to teach. It had become common practice already, so why mention it here specifically?

He is not the only one to ask this question, and he provides some answers. One answer in particular of interest has to do with the end of last week's parshah, which says: It happened that when Moshe descended from Mount Sinai, and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moshe's hand when he descended from the mountain, Moshe did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant while [G-d] had spoken with him. Aharon and all the Children of Israel saw Moshe and behold, the skin of his face had become radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. (Shemos 34:29-30)

The Moshe that came down the mountain was not exactly the same Moshe who had ascended. He was certainly the same person as he was before, with the addition of a certain spiritual glow that, apparently, was not only perceivable by others, but even frightening to them.

This is why the Ohr HaChaim explains, the Torah states that Moshe Rabbeinu gathered the people together to hear him speak. He had to, since many were afraid to be in his presence.

The question is, should Moshe's new found radiance have been so frightening to them? Not really, as Rashi explains: And they were afraid to come near him: Come and see how great the power of sin is! Before they sinned [with the golden calf], what does it say? "And the appearance of the glory of G-d was like a consuming fire on top of the mountain, before the eyes of the Children of Israel" (Shemos 24:17), and they were neither frightened nor did they shake. Since they had made the calf, they recoiled and shook even from Moshe's rays of splendor. (Rashi, Shemos 34:30)

It has to do with the impact of sin on a person's sense of self-worth. Worthy people do not fear. Instead, they trust in G-d and rely on His help. They don't worry about being tricked, or taken advantage of, or being abused in any way. They trust that G-d looks out for them, and take comfort in the fact.

Sin makes a person feel guilty. Even sinful people feel guilty because of their sins. It's just that rather than feel remorse, beat themselves up, and then do teshuvah, they just get angry. Instead of blame themselves for their behavior, and therefore empower themselves to do teshuvah, they blame everyone else. Anyone who makes them feel worse about themselves becomes a target.

Everyone needs to feel worthy. Self-worth is what gets us out of bed in the morning, and it inspires us to do something meaningful with our days. It keeps us in check and promotes friendly behavior and nice traits such as humility, sensitivity to others, etc. We're literally nothing without it, which is why some people who do not feel it tragically and prematurely end their lives.

Where does the need for self-worth come from? It doesn't come from the physical part of us, because we see how low a person can stoop when physically desperate. In fact, it is often the antics of the body that erode a person's sense of worth.

That leaves the soul. The soul is a piece of the Divine. It can never lack self-worth because it is part of G-d. As such, it is committed to doing only those things that maintain self-worth: Antoninus said to Rebi: "The body and the soul can both free themselves from judgment. The body can plead: 'The soul has sinned, [the proof being] that from the day it left me I lie like a dumb stone in the grave [powerless to do anything].' The soul can say: 'The body has sinned, [the proof being] that from the day I departed from it I fly about in the air like a bird [and commit no sin]'." (Sanhedrin 91a)

The trouble is that until the soul is able to influence the body sufficiently to live meaningfully, it is forced to become involved in all kinds of meaningless, and sometimes even immoral, activities. When a person is only a baby, it is powerless to do much about the situation. In an adolescent, it struggles just to make the body aware of the right thing. When the person becomes a teenager, it is constantly at war with the body, and depending upon the circumstances, not always victorious.

Adulthood offers hope, but that too depends upon the level of spiritual maturity of the person, that is, how far the body has spiritually come since it was first born. It also depends upon the world in which a person lives. If the world "talks" to the body, the soul will struggle. If the environment is spiritual, then the soul will have support.

If a person's soul has to make too many sacrifices along the way, it will complain. It will make life uncomfortable for the body, especially since it knows it will also have to answer for the sins performed with the body: The Holy One, Blessed is He, will bring the soul, [re]place it in the body, and judge them together. (Sanhedrin 91b)

The guilt that a person feels? The lack of self-worth driving us crazy? That's the soul talking, giving a person a choice to shape up or ship out. The former means getting one's spiritual act together, the reward being greatness in this world and incredible eternal pleasure in the World-to-Come. The latter means blaming G-d and the world for your problems, and sinking deeper into despair.

The good news is that it is rarely too late to get it right. This is what "vayakhel" is also saying: "You allowed the golden calf to be built and worshipped, a tremendous offense against Me, G-d said. Nevertheless, if you're ready to return to Me, I am ready to gather you in."

This is also part of the message of Machtzis HaShekel as well. As long as you are still ready and able to contribute your half-shekel to the nation, you are still part of it. To sin is human, to repent is Divine, because it means you are listening to you soul.

One of the sad ironies of life is that everyone craves self-worth. We're supposed to. It is what fuels us to live meaningful existences. We crave it so much that some people cheat and try to get it illicitly. They do things to draw attention to themselves, physical things, not spiritual things. They may entertain people, but they don't necessarily contribute all that much to the betterment of mankind.

When they do, and some make great effort to do so, they are truly admired and for the right reasons. Natural talent is not something we get to choose. Using it for selfless reasons is, and when people do, they are respected for their contributions to the welfare of others.

More than likely, such acts of selflessness go a lot farther to provide such people with a sense of self-worth than what they might get paid hundreds of millions of dollars to do. The soul knows what truly counts in life and what is secondary, if that. All the accolades in the world cannot create self-worth from anything except that which casts us in a Divine light.

The Megillah says that Haman tried to buy the right to exterminate the Jews in his time. The Talmud tells us that, in anticipation of this, G-d had the Jewish people give the half-shekel in Moshe's time. Our giving of money for the right reasons was supposed to counteract his giving of money for the wrong reasons.

Any tzedakah could have done that. If the point was merely the act of charity, why not focus on all the hospitality Jews have offered others over the generations? Surely that has amounted to all lot more value than the half-shekels of the nation in the desert.

Thus, it was about more than the charity itself.

It was specifically about the half-shekel, and all it represented. The half-shekel was more than a contribution to buy sacrifices for the Temple service. It was the purchase of the right to be a part of a whole, not just a Jew, but a member of "Klal Yisroel."

This is what renders Amalek powerless, which is why Haman complained about the way the Jews stick to themselves and refuse to integrate. If 10 Jews doven separately, it is merely the prayer of 10 individual Jews. If they come together in a minyan, it becomes a far more powerful prayer than 10 individuals could ever generate.

The same thing is true of the nation in general. Functioning only as individuals, we are a small nation and vulnerable to attack, even destruction. As a unified people, especially under the banner of Torah, our energy is far greater than our numbers would suggest. The parshah, the Maftir, and Purim teach this as well.


**MACHON ZOMET**

# Shabbat B'Shabbato

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The fact that the Torah portion of Vayakhel and the special Haftarah of Shekalim occur together creates a meaningful message for us. The passages of the Tabernacle begin with the verse, "Let them take a donation for Me from Bnei Yisrael -- from every man whose heart wants to contribute shall you take a donation" [Shemot 25:2]. Turning directly to the nation in this way emphasizes the voluntary aspect and the room for individual initiative in the building of the Tabernacle. Rashi notes that the word "teruma" -- contribution -- implies "good will." In discussing the Tabernacle, Moshe stresses the aspect of personal desire and voluntary participation of the nation. The construction of the Tabernacle is based on a voluntary spirit and depends on an initiative by the people.

The nation responds to Moshe's call. In this week's Torah portion this seems in fact to be part of their repentance for the act of making the Golden Calf. "And they brought more contributions every morning... And the artists said to Moshe, the nation is bringing too much... And Moshe gave a command, and an announcement was sent out in the camp, telling all men and women: Do not do any more work for the holy contribution. And the people stopped bringing, and the items were sufficient for all the labors that were needed, with some extra." [36:3-7]. The atmosphere of volunteering and the involvement of the people in the labors of the Tabernacle were far beyond the basic needs for the project.

A Tabernacle that is built up from donations is a place where there is room for personal enthusiasm to break out. Every individual can find self-expression, first with respect to the contribution itself and then mainly according to his or her abilities and desires. In order to build the framework for the Tabernacle, what is needed is spontaneous enthusiasm, where every person's unique traits can show through. However, in order to continue the day-to-day existence of the Tabernacle and the continuity of the sacrifices, it is necessary to also develop a characteristic of determination, even after the enthusiasm has waned and the joy of innovation may have cooled somewhat. And that is the purpose of the mitzva of the half shekel. "This is what every person who is counted should give... The rich person should not give more and the poor person should not give less than half a shekel..." [30:14-15]. The donation of half a shekel differs from the first contribution. It does not depend on the good will of the person, but rather every person who is counted is obligated to bring it. The donation is set and measured, and it does not depend on the character or the abilities of the person. On one hand, the command puts limits on the voluntary actions by giving strict definitions, but on the other hand it demands that every person gives a small set amount. The small amount and the limits build up into a significant donation when the gifts of the entire community are combined.

The difference between the two related portions, Vayakhel and Pekudai, also points to this concept. The beginning of Vayakhel emphasizes the individual contributions of the people, without any bounds, while Pekudai sets many limits with respect to the construction of the Tabernacle. Again and again, the Torah emphasizes that the commands of building the Tabernacle were observed "in the way that G-d commanded Moshe, that is what they did."

The challenge of building the Tabernacle can be compared to the challenge that every individual faces in serving G-d. On one hand, there is a personal approach and enthusiasm, which deepens the link to the Holy One, Blessed be He, while on the other hand there are limiting and defined mitzvot. Either one without the other is not sufficient. What is needed is to do things "just as G-d commanded Moshe."