

This week's Torah reading, Parshat Emor, contains a thorough discussion of the Moadim, our Holiday season. One would expect that this discussion should begin with either Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Jewish calendar season, or, Passover, the inauguration of the Jewish nation following the exodus from Egypt. Yet, neither of those is the opening to this section of the Torah. The Torah commences with the following verse, "Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them: The appointed seasons of G-D, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are My appointed seasons. Six days shall work be done; but on the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation; you shall do no manner of work; it is a sabbath unto G-D in all your dwellings." Somewhat surprisingly, the prologue to this section is an introduction to the laws of Shabbat. While Shabbat is indeed a holy day of the week and perhaps semantically a Moed, it is rather surprising that this section's prelude should be yet another reminder of the importance of Shabbat.

Rash in his commentary on the verse asks this very question and quotes an answer found in the Midrash. He writes that the introduction to the festivals is Shabbat to teach us that whoever desecrates the festivals is considered as if he had desecrated the Sabbath, and that whoever who fulfills the festivals is considered as if he has fulfilled the Sabbath.

While this is certainly a noble idea and serves as an important introduction to the importance of the festivals in our lives, it still seems that there might be a deeper meaning to this unusual preface. In fact, the great Chassidic master Rav Bunim of Peshichsa once famously said that whoever can reveal this hidden secret as to why the Torah chose Shabbat as the foreword for the chapter of Festivals will bring half the redemption to the universe.

The Gerrer Rebbe, Rabbi Yitchak Meir Alter suggests that perhaps to understand the connection between Shabbat and the festivals, one first must understand the distinction between the two. Our Shabbat is scheduled and divinely sanctified by G-D. G-D rested on the seventh day of creation and since that time we have been enjoined to rest on His day. Mankind plays no role in the establishment of Shabbat. Our role is simply to observe it, enjoy it and nourish our spiritual souls with it. Yet, the same cannot be said with the holidays; our holidays are dependent on our calendar, which is dependent on our courts. Although, the actual date is written in the Torah, it is mankind, through our court proceedings and calendar manipulations who ultimately decide when these festivals should occur. However, the Rebbe explains, we have no ability to sanctify time and turn a commonplace day into a festival without first achieving an intense spiritual sanctity within ourselves. This inner consecration can only be achieved through our observance of Shabbat. When we sanctify ourselves through the spiritual experience of Shabbat that is when we have the capability to sanctify time and transform weekday into holiday. Shabbat is the preface to the festivals because without it and our spiritual growth from it, there would actually not be any festivals at all.

Shabbat Shalom

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