

Parashat Vayak'hel - Light My Fire

Echoes of Eden
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Parashat Vayak'hel
Light My Fire

In the aftermath of the golden calf debacle, in the wake of the destruction and death it caused, and after God agreed to forgive the nation and move forward, Moshe descends from Mount Sinai with a new set of Tablets. At last, Moshe has the opportunity to speak to the people. These same people had stood at Sinai and heard the commandments spoken by God Himself, but had “backslid,” and worshiped the golden calf. Now, Moshe is to transmit everything he learned at the summit of Mount Sinai. Where should he begin? As readers, we might imagine the crackle of expectation in the air: Moshe is presented with an unparalleled opportunity to educate and inspire the repentant nation, to transmit the Torah he has brought down from on high. How should he proceed?

This very particular moment, a moment laden with remorse, tinged with longing for the holiness that had been forfeited, awash in the desire to hear and obey the word of God, is where Parashat Vayakhel begins. Moshe gathers the entire nation, and he begins with Shabbat. Why was this his choice for the first and foremost lesson? The logic behind the selection of Shabbat may be seen from various perspectives: On the one hand, Shabbat may have been used as an antidote to idolatry. The people needed a refresher course, as it were, in Jewish theology, and as a lesson of God as Creator of the universe, Shabbat is an outstanding reminder and teaching aid. Additionally, Shabbat is more than a dry lesson in Jewish thought; it is a powerful and moving experience which, we might conjecture, people had been easily led astray by the thrilling, sensual extravaganza of idolatry: The food and drink and physical pleasure of Shabbat was intended to counter the very powerful experience of worshipping the calf.

We should note that this is not the first, the second, nor even the third time that Shabbat is mentioned in the book of Shmot. The first time was when the manna fell for six days, and desisted on the seventh. The people noticed that a double portion had fallen on the sixth day, and Moshe explained that this is what he had taught them (presumably at Marah) regarding Shabbat: No one was to go out on the seventh day to collect the manna. This was their first experience of Shabbat, and this single prohibition was later included in the larger corpus of the Laws of Shabbat. Indeed, the Torah tells us that there were those who violated Shabbat, even when there was only one single prohibition, going out with basket in hand with the intention of collecting the manna.

In Parashat Vayakhel, as Moshe begins to teach the people Torah, another prohibition is added, a second Law of Shabbat singled out: It is prohibited to light fire on the Sabbath day. Eventually, the corpus of Shabbat Laws will include 39 categories of creative work that are prohibited on Shabbat; these categories are derived from the Torah's description of the creative work employed in building the Mishkan. These 39 categories are outlined by our sages in the Mishnah, as an extrapolation of the relevant passages from the Torah, with the notable exception of the two categories we have seen singled out and specifically prohibited by the Torah itself, namely: carrying objects between domains, as was specifically prohibited regarding the manna, and the use of fire, as we have seen in this week's parashah.^[1]

In a sense, these two categories of creative work stand at opposite poles on the spectrum of human endeavor; perhaps that is why they are singled out: Neither the kindling of fire nor the transport of objects from one domain to another fits easily into the formal categories that comprise the laws of Shabbat. These two categories represent two extremes as far as human creativity is concerned: Fire is the most elusive of the elements; in the more abstract, conceptual name we use to describe it – energy – it is the very symbol and essence of human creativity and ingenuity. We might say that all of technology is, in one way or another, man's harnessing of energy, his use of fire for the advancement of humankind. Conversely, carrying objects is the least creative of the categories of "work" that are forbidden on Shabbat, as the object itself undergoes no transformation but is merely transferred from one location to another. However, these two "outliers" may convey a message that is far deeper than meets the eye.

Let us return to the primary discussion of Shabbat, found in the Ten Commandments. The fourth commandment, as found in the book of Shmot, reads:

Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. You can work during the six weekdays and do all your tasks.... For God made the heaven and the earth [and] the sea, and all that is in them, in six days, but he rested on the seventh. God therefore blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Shmot 20:8-11)

On the other hand, in the parallel passage in the book of Dvarim, when the Ten Commandments are reiterated, there is a striking difference:

Observe the Sabbath to keep it holy, as God your Lord commanded you. You can work during the six weekdays, and do all your tasks... You must remember that you were slaves in Egypt, when God your Lord brought you out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. It is for this reason that God your Lord has commanded you to keep the Shabbat. (D'varim 5:12-15)

The description of Shabbat in Shmot refers to the Creation narrative as the rationale for Shabbat observance: Through our cessation of creative work on the seventh day, we acknowledge and testify that God is the Creator. In particular, we should not overlook the fact that the very first act of Creation was the decree, "Let there be light." So, too, according to a rabbinic tradition, mankind's first foray into creativity was with the discovery and use of fire. In emulation of God, Adam's first creative gesture was the use of fire when the first Shabbat drew to a close. For this reason, the prohibition against the use of fire on Shabbat is singled out; it is, in essence, the very heart of the matter, the very crux of the story of the Creation of the universe and of mankind's place within it as a sentient being created in the image of God.

On the other hand, the Ten Commandments recorded in Dvarim memorialize the Exodus from Egypt: As we stress in the haggadah, God took one nation from the midst of another, carrying us out – quite literally, removing us from one domain to another, from the house of bondage to the wide open spaces of freedom.

We may say, then, that the two formulations of Shabbat, the two rationales for observing Shabbat that are recorded in the two accounts of the Ten Commandments, are reflected in the two prohibitions that were singled out: lighting fire, as a reflection of Creation, and transferring objects between domains, as a reflection of the Exodus. By honoring and cherishing Shabbat, we testify to both of these historic events and strengthen our commitment to our covenant with God. By desisting from creative work, and particularly from the two categories that were singled out, we take advantage of our weekly opportunity to emulate God and tap into the holiness of the seventh day.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2016/02/vayakhel-audio-and-essays.html>

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[1] See my previous treatment of these two prohibitions of Shabbat in [A River Flowed from Eden](#) (New York: Kodesh Press, 2015), p. 87-90.