

A Few Thoughts on the Double-Parashah Vayak'hel-Pekudei / Shabbat HaChodesh – March 12, 2021

Exodus 35:1 - 40:38; Exodus 12:1-20; Ezekiel 45:18 - 46:15; Samuel I 20:18; Samuel I 20:42

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Shabbat HaChodesh is the 4th of the special Shabbatot that fall between the beginning of the month of Adar and Pesach. It occurs on, or immediately before, the first of Nisan, the month of Pesach. Because the first of Nisan was the day on which HaShem announced to Moses the impending Exodus and presented instructions for its preparation, Nisan is our most important month. “This month shall be to you the head of the months; to you it shall be the first of the months of the year.” (Exodus 12:2) Therefore, the first of Nisan is the beginning of the Jewish liturgical year, and the reign of kings was also calculated from that date. In addition, it is the first new moon of spring, the time of awakening. The month of Nisan has four additional names: *Rosh Chodeshim* (The Head of the Months), *Chodesh Ha-Aviv* (The Month of Spring), *Chodesh HaRishon* (The First Month), *Chodesh HaGeulah* (The Month of the Redemption). It is assigned to the Tribe of Judah, who inherited the kingship and from whom the Messiah is to come; and according to the Talmud, Abraham, Isaac, and Jakob all were born and died during the month of Nisan. Many other events took place during Nisan, including the inauguration of the *mishkan*, the death of Miriam, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the defeat of Jericho, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and many of the events surrounding the holiday of Purim. Talmud Tractate Rosh HaShanah 11a states, “In Nisan our forefathers were redeemed from Egypt and in Nisan we will be redeemed.”

Our double parashah repeats much of what we read before the incident with the golden calf, but in greater detail, culminating in the completion of the *mishkan* and the outfitting of the priests, with Moses himself giving the finishing touches. But at the beginning of our reading, before Moses begins asking the people for their contributions and detailing the work to be done, he reiterates the command to observe Shabbat. “Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have sanctity, a day of complete rest to HaShem; whoever performs work thereon shall be put to death.” Why repeat HaShem’s instructions, and why with this dire warning? First of all, in reality, the *mishkan* is the microcosmic rendition of HaShem’s creation – our human way of expressing that we understand and appreciate the magnificence of HaShem’s work. One of the main ways we show our admiration for something or someone is by imitation. Trends in art, literature, music, and fashion are usually sparked by the innovations of the people we admire most. It’s our way of feeling close to them, of being in their orbit. The *mishkan* is a mini universe, created in an act of *imitatio dei*, of emulating HaShem. The man designated by HaShem to lead the project is named Bezalel, which literally means “in the shadow of God.” So, it stands to reason that if HaShem rested after six days of creation, so too, must we rest after six days of work. Shabbat is the most enduring sign of our eternal covenant, and observing Shabbat is how we demonstrate that not only are we upholding our part of it, but also, that we appreciate this unique and priceless gift. The work that is prohibited on Shabbat parallels the various labors involved with building the *mishkan* and maintaining its holiness. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that after the second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, we replaced sacred space with sacred time. We do have our sacred spaces in our places of worship and in our homes, but it is not where we observe Shabbat, but how we observe Shabbat that is important. Even though many of us might not keep Shabbat in strictly orthodox fashion, we all have the opportunity to make the day special by refraining from doing what we do during our six workdays. For one day a week we can really be human beings, i.e., we can disconnect from our everyday life and just simply be. In his book “Jewish With Feeling” Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi suggests we may engage in pursuits we enjoy, but for which we have no time during our workweek, even if some of these are prohibited by strict law – things like working in the garden or calling loved ones who live far away – as long as we do them in the spirit of Shabbat. He says, “Shabbats are like periods inserted into an otherwise endless run-on sentence.” How true! Especially now during Corona, setting aside one day a week to relax and refresh helps us notice the many little things that enrich our lives. We need Shabbat for our own physical and mental wellbeing, to give us strength to take on the challenges of daily life. How we keep Shabbat is a personal decision, but keeping Shabbat is essential to us both as individuals and as Jews. Ahad Ha’am, the founder of cultural Judaism famously said, “More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews.” The Hasidic masters teach that the sacred space of the *mishkan* now resides in the Shabbat holiness contained in our hearts and souls. To access it, we simply have to make time to open ourselves to its power. Ezekiel 46:1, part of our special reading for Rosh Chodesh Nisan prophesizes that the gate of the inner court of the reconstructed Temple shall be closed on the six working days but opened on Shabbat and on Rosh Chodesh. We have no Temple, but we have Shabbat, the beautiful, restful, rejuvenating day given to us in perpetuity by our Creator.

Shabbat shalom!