

Shabbat Parah is the third of the four special Shabbatot before Pesach. It reminds us that in Temple times all Israelites had to be ritually pure in order to participate in the *pesach* sacrifice, something to ponder as we begin meticulously preparing our homes for Pesach. The reading from Numbers deals with the red heifer, whose ashes mixed in living water purify those who have had contact with a corpse. Contact with a dead human being renders a person ritually impure, similar to the impurity from encountering someone with a skin disease or a discharge. Curiously, despite the obvious danger of physical contamination posed by the later, contact with even the tiniest bit of human remains is considered far more perilous. Our sages teach that when we die, the soul, which connects us to HaShem, departs, and the body becomes an inanimate object. Because a corpse was once a living person imbued with a spark of holiness, our ancestors considered it to be in a state of perpetual impurity, because a dead person is unable to return to a state of ritual purity. Whereas the Egyptians went to great lengths to preserve and provide for their dead in keeping with their concept of the afterlife, we do the exact opposite. We allow the body to disintegrate, because holiness cannot be contained in inanimate objects; holiness is a state of being. This is the overarching subject of our parashah. Everything concerning the *mishkan* must be chosen and crafted with deep respect and care, and specifically designated for use in proclaiming and illustrating the holiness of HaShem. Our parashah opens with the final instructions that were detailed in the past two parashiot. Now, building can begin, and HaShem names two men to manage the project: Betzalel and Oholiav, whose origins could not be more diverse. Betzalel, the chief architect and overseer, is the great-grandson of Miriam, grandson of her son Hur, of the tribe of Judah, aristocratic to the core and related to Moses as well. Oholiav hails from the lowly tribe of Dan, which descends from Jacob's concubine Bilhah. Although much has been written about Betzalel, the midrashim offer little information about Oholiav. In a discussion on maintaining the craftsmanship tradition of the family, Talmud Tractate Arakhin 16b notes that the mother of Hiram, whom Salomon fetched from Tyre to help build the first Temple, was a Danite. On the mystical side, the Zohar teaches that Betzalel represents the kabalistic attribute of *chessed* (kindness, benevolence), while Oholiav embodies *gevurah* (severity, strength, judgement – Note that Rachel names the son of her handmaid Bilhah Dan, from the word for judgement, declaring that HaShem has judged her and heard her plea for a son.) Their combined characteristics and skills work in harmony, the attribute of *tiferet*, which follows *chessed* and *gevurah* and is embodied in the *mishkan*. This is the ultimate message of their collaboration, transcending the confines of class and emphasizing that humans are not limited by their origins. After ensuring that the construction of the *mishkan* is in capable hands, HaShem suddenly returns to the topic of Shabbat, beginning with the word אַךְ (*akh* – only, however, yet, nevertheless). This word points to the message of the red heifer and of the golden calf, which is usually the focal point of this parashah. Caught up in the enthusiasm of building the *mishkan*, the people begin to miss Moses, and in desperation they take measures into their own hands and make themselves an object to worship. In the meantime, Moses is hearing, **However**, keep My Shabbats." In other words, the people should not begin to worship their work and forget for Whom it is intended. It is noteworthy that the book of Exodus prohibits working on Shabbat four times (20:9-10, 23:12, 31:15, 35:2). The first two address each of us personally, while the latter two are general prohibitions, i.e. no work shall be done. Just as HaShem rested after six days of creation, so too must we cease working on Shabbat. Viewed in this light, building the *mishkan*, is an act of *imitatio dei*, of striving to be as much like HaShem as is humanly possible. But the repetitions in 31:12-17 are puzzling. These verses form a chiasm: A-B-C-B-A, hinging on verses 14-15 "Therefore, keep the Sabbath, for it is a sacred thing for you. Those who desecrate it shall be put to death, for whoever performs work on it, that soul will be cut off from the midst of its people. Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord; whoever performs work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death." The outer verses define the principle of Shabbat and the penalty for desecrating it, with the first in the 3rd person plural, and the last generally, just as they are in these Torah portions. "V'shamru v'nei yisrael et hashabbat" We sing verses 16-17 every Shabbat, because we understand that there is a time to rest as well as a time to build. Shabbat is the sign of our eternal covenant with HaShem. And because we know that only HaShem can create *ex nihilo*, we understand that the inanimate objects we create with the materials HaShem provides can only frame holiness, they cannot contain or dispense it. Likewise, when a soul leaves a human being, the inanimate body that it once inhabited is no longer needed and must return to the elements from which it came. All of creation is ephemeral; only HaShem is eternal, and therefore holy. Shabbat and our festivals are the holy framework within which we worship our Creator, dressed in special clothing and using specific objects that exemplify holiness, but are not themselves intrinsically holy. Holiness is not a thing; it is a mindset, a state of being, in the special places we choose to designate as holy – our bodies, our homes, our houses of worship and study, and in nature. And as we observe cycles of work and rest, we are holy to HaShem, our holy God.

Shabbat shalom!