

Shabbat HaChodesh is the last of the four special Shabbatot between the beginning of Adar and the Shabbat before Pesach. It falls immediately before, or on Rosh Chodesh Nisan, the month of Pesach and the beginning of the Jewish liturgical year. HaShem's first commandment, to sanctify the week of Pesach in preparation for the Exodus, was issued on the first of Nisan. 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 indeed a month of liberation, renewal, and new beginnings, with a new calendar, a new story, and enormous potential. But for the Israelites, ill-equipped to face the challenges of freedom after generations of slavery, it is also a month of enormous upheaval. Between the potential of the *mishkan* and actually building it lies the debacle of the golden calf. In Parashiot Terumah and Tetzaveh Moses had received HaShem's blueprint. Now, Vayakhel and Pekudei bring it into the messy, human world. The use of the word *יִקְהַל* (*gather, convene*) is significant: Last week the people, upset and frightened by Moses' long absence, *gather* around Aaron to voice their concerns (32:1), which leads to the tragedy of the golden calf. Now, Moses *convenes* the entire population (35:1) and repeats HaShem's instructions for building the *mishkan*. Reframing them as a collective undertaking, he restores the feeling of unity that the golden calf had destroyed. It is noteworthy that after reiterating the commandment to cease working on Shabbat, he adds: "You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwelling places on the Sabbath day." (35:3) This is the Torah's only explicit work prohibition, and it has generated centuries of debate. Talmud Tractate Shabbat 70a discusses it at great length, concluding that: "[Fire] was singled out in order to equate the other labors to it and to tell you: Just as kindling is a primary category of prohibited labor, and one is liable for performing it on its own, ... It was singled out to divide the various labors and to establish liability for performance of each of them." Italian-Israeli scholar Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951) notes that HaShem only allowed the people to worship with material offerings within the confines of the *mishkan* and later, the Temple, where fire played a prominent role. The explicit prohibition of kindling fire on Shabbat is actually a polemic against the pagan custom of lighting festival fires in the home as well as a subtle reference to the connection of fire with the golden calf, i.e., adopting the idolatrous practices of the surrounding cultures. Instead, we sanctify time with our weekly, monthly, and yearly round of festivals that commemorate the events and ideals that shaped and continue to inspire us. The principle of Shabbat is the unique expression of a unique relationship between a people and their unique deity. It is also the ultimate expression of boundaries. The golden calf was an expression of unbounded religious longing coupled with unbounded religious enthusiasm plus unbounded fear of being leaderless. Now, the people must learn to observe boundaries. The *mishkan* is the antidote to the excesses of idolatry, but only if proper boundaries are observed there and in the home. In the *mishkan* perpetual fire represents HaShem's ongoing creative energy. Shabbat reminds us that we do not have this power. We prepare in advance so that on Shabbat we can rest in gratitude for what HaShem continues to provide. Shabbat is about being grounded enough to trust in our unseen God, and in our own abilities to wisely use what HaShem provides. The golden calf, a product of anxiety and doubt, is the opposite. It is no accident that the man HaShem designates to lead the building project is named Betzalel, which literally means "in the shadow of God." In the TaNaKh shadow is often a metaphor for protection or intimacy. Betzalel builds a space where the people can draw near to HaShem without being consumed. His artistry mirrors HaShem's creativity, but only from the shadow, the liminal space where human beings can receive and realize Divine intention without claiming it as their own. Only HaShem creates *ex nihilo*. We re-create using the materials and wisdom HaShem has given us. We live in the shadow of HaShem's boundaries, the first of which is the rhythm of creation: six days of work and one day of rest. Kindling fire is an act of creation; by refraining from doing so on Shabbat we imitate HaShem's rest and honor the priceless gift of sacred time. Shabbat is the most enduring and eloquent sign of our eternal covenant. In embracing Divine rhythm we affirm that resting on Shabbat does not diminish our creativity; it sanctifies it, returning our work to its Source. We need Shabbat for our own physical and mental wellbeing; but how we observe Shabbat is a personal decision. Even though many of us might not do so in strictly orthodox fashion, we all can make the day special by refraining from doing what we do in our workaday life. For one day a week we can disconnect and just simply *be*. 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. In his book "Jewish With Feeling" Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi z"l teaches that activities that restore the soul, even if technically prohibited, are permitted if they are done with reverence. He says, "Shabbats are like periods inserted into an otherwise endless run-on sentence." Indeed, Shabbat should be a state of consciousness grounded in trust, not a set of rules grounded in fear. In the words of Ahad Ha'am, "More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews."

Shabbat shalom!