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Vayakhel

Putting G-d First

Good Shabbos!

It's around this time of year each year that Israeli citizens head to their country's polls to choose a new government.

Now, it goes without saying that Jews don't let any election go by quietly—and especially in Israel, the election cycle constantly creates exciting new headlines.

So at a political rally one Saturday night in Israel not too long ago, one speaker got up and said that we have to get rid of the handful of corrupt people who influence the government, and he specifically mentioned who he was referring to. And having gotten too hotheaded, he included public welfare scam artists and thieves together with “mezuzah-kissers” and people who visit sages' graves. He didn't stop until he lumped them all together as “wild weeds.”

A firestorm immediately broke out in Israel. Many public figures denounced his words and sharply opposed his ridicule of the traditional Jewish faith of the generations, expressed in kissing mezuzahs and visiting the graves of sages.

But what really happened here was the old debate in Israel between those less traditional and those more so. While everyone agrees that there's a need for religion in Israel (you can be sure that that very same comedian has a mezuzah at least on his front door and was married under Jewish law), the debate is actually over what's primary and what's secondary—what needs to be emphasized.

In other words, is the country the “State of Tel Aviv” but also happens to have a holy city named Jerusalem? Or is the central city of Israel Jerusalem, and everything else revolves around it?

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

This week, we read the Torah portion of Vayakhel, which deals with the actual construction of the Mishkan in all its minute details.

The Torah describes the building of the Mishkan with over 200 verses. But before Moshe instructed the Jewish Nation how to build the mishkan, in the very second verse of the Parshah (Shmos 35:2), he prefaces it with: “Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have sanctity, a day of complete rest to the L-rd.”

So we can immediately ask the obvious question: Why did Moshe have to repeat the Fourth Commandment that the Jewish Nation had already heard at Mt. Sinai? And Rashi says, “He prefaced the command to build the Mishkan with the warning to keep Shabbos to say to them that the building of the Mishkan does not override the keeping of Shabbos” (Shmos 35:2).

Now, the Jewish Nation already knew at that point that working on Shabbos was forbidden. But since there was now a special command to build a Mishkan for G-d, they could have erred and thought that this new mitzvah overrides Shabbos. And so Moshe preceded the construction of the Mishkan with the observance of Shabbos so as to emphasize that the building of the Mishkan does not override Shabbos.

But, as is known, it's not the first time that the building of the Mishkan is mentioned in the Torah. The entire saga is already laid out in the Torah portions of Terumah and Tetzaveh—however, over there we are only told how G-d commanded Moshe to build the Mishkan; here, the Torah reviews the construction, but telling us that Moshe actually instructed the Jewish Nation to do so.

And even then, when G-d gave Moshe the command to build the Mishkan, G-d mentioned the mitzvah of Shabbos, and almost verbatim: “Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the L-rd.” And Rashi even explains the same thing there: “And you, even though I charged you to command them regarding the construction of the Mishkan, let overriding Shabbos for that work not be taken lightly” (Shmos 31:13).

But what's interesting is that in the Torah portion of Vayakhel, Moshe put the commandment about Shabbos before the construction of the Mishkan. However, in the Torah portions of Terumah and Tetzavah, G-d puts the construction of the Mishkan first—and only later, in the Parshah of Ki Tisa, after about 230 verses, does He mention the command of keeping Shabbos!

And so we can ask the question: Why did Moshe change the order in which G-d himself put things by mentioning Shabbos first and only then the construction of the Mishkan? (See Likutei Sichos Vol. 11 pg. 159.)

Now, there is an interesting discussion in the Talmud about a hypothetical case in which a person finds himself stranded in the desert, or on an island, and he doesn't know when Shabbos will be.

Seriously speaking, even in today's day and age, with cell phones and GPS and technology and all, you could still travel to places today that don't even have telephone lines, and then your cell phone dies. Then you head on down to the local tourist bar and have one drink too many, and then you stagger back to your little hostel room and collapse into bed for a very long nap. When you wake up finally, you don't remember what day it is—is it Thursday or Friday? And now you don't have any real way of actually finding out.

However, that scenario nowadays is still going to be rather rare. But 500 or 1,000 years ago, that sort of thing could, and did, happen.

And so we go back to the Talmud's question here: What is a person supposed to do with regards to Shabbos if he doesn't know what day it is? If today is Friday, then he has to take in Shabbos come nightfall. But if today is Thursday, then he has to wait until tomorrow night to usher in the Shabbos.

So the Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 69b) deals with this problem: “R. Huna says, ‘One who was traveling in the desert and doesn't know when Shabbos is should count six days and observe one day.’” The Sage Rav Huna holds that such a traveler should count six days out from the first day of confusion, and mark the seventh day as Shabbos.

However, another Sage, Rabbi Chiya Bar Rav, says the opposite. He maintains that one should first observe Shabbos right away, and then count six days from that day out.

So the Talmud continues and explains what they are differing on: “One master argued like the creation of the universe, and one master argued like the first man.” Rav Huna argued that one should act like G-d Himself, Who created the universe in six days and then rested on the seventh. Thus, one who loses track of time should do the same thing. By contrast, Rav Chiya held that one should be like Adam, the first human being, who was created on the sixth day of Creation. Adam began his week with Shabbos and only thereafter counted the six days of the week—and thus, a person who loses track of time needs to start counting a new week beginning with Shabbos, and only after that to start counting the days of the week. (See *Toras Menachem* Vol. 48, pg. 277.)

And so in the story of the Mishkan, G-d first commands the Jewish Nation to build the Mishkan, which was built during the six days of the week, and only after that does He mention Shabbos. By contrast, Moshe Rabbeinu followed in the footsteps of Adam HaRishon, the first human being, first mentioning Shabbos and only afterwards giving the Jews the commandment to build the Mishkan.

So what you have here is essentially a debate over what’s more important.

Now, everyone agrees that there are holy days and ordinary days, and sacred and ordinary things and times—the only question is: what comes first?

For example, if a person makes a profit of \$1,000, he needs to set aside maaser, or a tenth, of it to charity. One scenario is that he first tends to his personal needs with the \$900 that belongs to him. Then, and only then, does he give the remaining \$100 to charity. The other scenario is that he gives the \$100 to charity first, and only then does he use what’s left for himself.

So, which way is right?

Everyone will agree that the first thing one should do is donate the \$100 to charity. Why is this so? Simple! Because who knows what his financial situation will be after he uses the other \$900? Will he still be able to afford the \$100 charity, or will he need that money for his own needs? So it’s better to give the charity right away while he still can—and the same holds true for every mitzvah.

G-d, who has control over the future, is able to decide for himself that He should start with six days of creation and end them with one day of Shabbos. But flesh and blood Man, who has no control over the future, is forbidden to postpone a mitzvah for later, because he doesn’t know what will happen in the future.

And this debate applies to every subject in Judaism—for example, in Jewish schools, religious studies are taught for several hours every day, with the rest of the day allocated to general studies. So again we can ask: which comes first? Some will say that it doesn’t matter which one comes first—it only matters that those hours are dedicated to religious studies in the first place. But the Rebbe strongly argued that religious studies must take place right away at the start of the day because they are more important; only afterward can you teach children general studies. (See *Likutei Sichos* Vol. II, pg. 327.)

And that's the same dilemma: what comes first? Six days of the week and only after that, Shabbos? Or do we start first with Shabbos, because Shabbos is holy, and only then descend into the days of the week? And does the construction of the Mishkan take precedence over Shabbos, or does Shabbos take precedence over construction of the Mishkan?

Now, Moshe Rabbeinu taught us in this week's Torah portion that Shabbos comes before all else. The Jew starts each weekday with a prayer that is a piece of the Shabbos prayers, meaning, that there's a piece of Shabbos in each weekday itself. Similarly, the Jew gives charity first, and only afterwards uses the rest of his money.

And so, my friends, when we put G-d's needs before ours, then G-d responds in kind by putting our needs before His, blessing us with children, life and abundant prosperity.

Good Shabbos!