



## Sacred Space, Sacred Time

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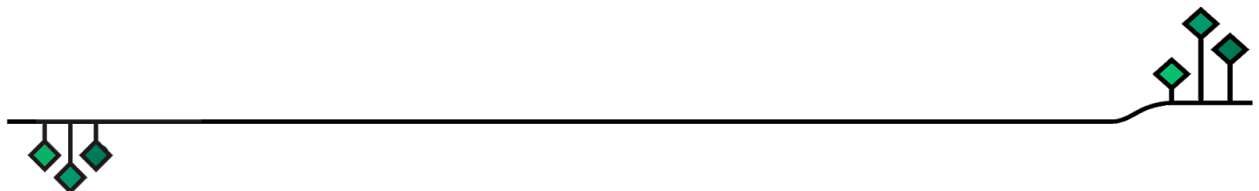
### **Parashat VaYakhel-Pekudei 5781**

Our double Torah portion concludes the tabernacle section of the Book of Exodus. It tells how the various parts of the tabernacle were fashioned, then it describes the erection of the building, the placing of all its appurtenances in their proper places, and finishes with a financial report on the amounts of precious metals used and an inventory of the special textiles incorporated.

Surprisingly, the Torah “interrupts” the account to instruct the Israelite on laws of Shabbat observance. The Torah tells us that labor (*melakhah*, dignified, creative work), that is, creation, is prohibited on the Shabbat (Exodus 35:2-3). The traditional commentaries scramble to explain the insertion of a seemingly unrelated set of laws. In his commentary Rashi suggests that the Shabbat instruction is inserted here—before the construction is described—to underscore that the work of building the tabernacle is prohibited on Shabbat.<sup>1</sup> The holy work of building a house in which to meet and serve God, nevertheless, must stop on Shabbat. Getting the sanctuary done faster is not religiously significant enough to interfere

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi’s comment on Exodus 35:2, based on the Mekhilta.

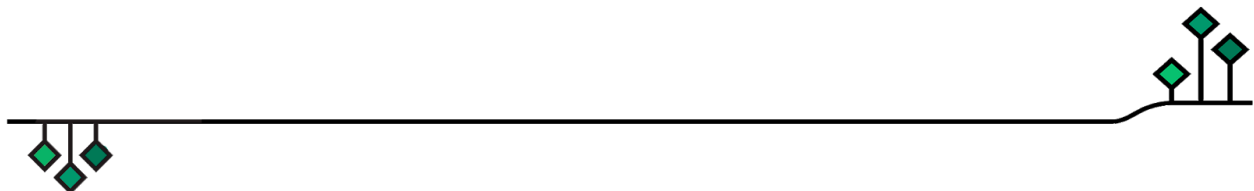


with the global Shabbat instruction to live a day of pure being, dedicated to internal reflection and relationship. (Only *pikuaḥ nefesh*, saving a life, is weighty enough to override the Shabbat prohibition of labor, because life is Judaism's highest value).

There is another possible approach. These Shabbat laws are not an interruption but a juxtaposition. Shabbat represents **sacred time**. The tabernacle represents **sacred space**. These two phenomena are closely related. They are parallel to each other and they play an identical role in the ecology of Jewish religion. Hence they appear together in our Torah portion.

The key goal of Judaism, as I have argued in this series, is to repair and perfect the world so life will flourish to its fullest degree. In the Messianic age, human honor and dignity—the infinite value, equality, and uniqueness of every individual—will be upheld on a daily basis in real life. Living the Jewish covenant involves working in every generation to overcome the inequalities inflicted by poverty, oppression or discrimination, as well as to end the life-degrading effects of hunger, war, and sickness. We work on the present reality in an effort to improve it. There is a real tension between the ideal we strive for and what can be done in the present status quo. This tension is the dynamic which generates the energy to pursue our activities at an intense (covenantal) level and strive to live by the higher values in our daily lives. Given that the pace of covenantal improvement is incremental, we spend our whole lives in this work and the task is passed on to the next generation.

The challenge is: How do we keep up the present impact of the ideal, when its actual realization is so far away? The covenantal process generates a real danger, that one will participate in—and then accommodate—the present reality, so as to slip into its routine. One



may even unconsciously come to accept the norms and expectations of the status quo. How can we avoid selling out the dream and the mission?

There is a second danger. “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?”<sup>2</sup> How do we not lose the intensity and drawing power of the dream? This is the Achilles heel of the covenantal method, with its commitment to function in the present reality while working to change it.

The Jewish tradition deals with this challenge by creating sacred time and sacred space. The future perfected world is brought forward into the present in the form of a “mini-cosmos,” a miniature version of the ultimate goal. In the realm of time, the Torah carves out one day of the week, Shabbat. A. J. Heschel calls it a “palace in time.”<sup>3</sup> During these twenty-five hours, one experiences the ultimate reality-to-come. On Shabbat, there is no labor (*melakhah*), i.e. dignified creative work to upgrade the world. This is not so much a prohibition as it is an imagined future fantasy, turned into a present experience. On this day, the world is complete, so there is nothing left to do.<sup>4</sup>

In a perfect world, one needs only to be, to live, to relate to family and friends, to self-develop, to learn Torah, to make love, to have family meals with time for conversation, to sing songs, to learn, as well as to enjoy company and guests. On Shabbat, good food and wine is provided to deepen the pleasure. On Shabbat there is no war, no deprivation, no public mourning. In effect, one lives in Messianic time and experiences the joys of a completely repaired world and

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<sup>2</sup> The first lines of Langston Hughes’ poem, *Harlem* (1990).

<sup>3</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, ch. 1, pp. 12-25.

<sup>4</sup> For another exploration of this theme, see Shai Held’s essay on Parashat BeHar, “Another World to Live In: The Meaning of Shabbat,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/another-world-live>, and published in Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah*.



the delight of a fully human experience with no distraction or anxieties to mar the day. For now, this is only twenty-five hours and the peace and perfection are artificially created in that the rest of the world is not keeping Shabbat. But for the practitioner, the promised future perfection is present, vivid, and real.<sup>5</sup>

The same function is carried out in the creation of sacred space. In this building—be it tabernacle or temple—one carves out a mini-world. It is made of precious, permanent, non-decaying metals, like gold and silver, to symbolize eternity and the absence of decay and death. In this space, no human death is present. Even people who have been in proximity to death and as a result become ritually impure, cannot enter until they have undergone a purification and rebirth-to-life ceremony. In this space, the priests are perfect physical specimens, foreshadowing the Messianic era with full cure of disabilities that handicap people.<sup>6</sup> Everyone is ethically on their best behavior.<sup>7</sup> There is no war, no strife, no clashing interests. One feels the presence of God in the absence of evil and in the unity of the divine and human in common cause. Again the Messianic reality is only inside this one building. But the experience is vivid and real.

This is the covenantal method of keeping the dream alive. A mini-redeemed world is set up and experienced deeply in time and space now. The encounter is so powerful that the participant knows that this is real - not just an idle fantasy. Thanks to this present experience, the future is not some distant star that is too far away to exercise gravitational pull. Then

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<sup>5</sup> For a fuller exposition of Shabbat as Messianic preenactment, see I. Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, especially pp. 149-163.

<sup>6</sup> On this theme, see my previous essay on Parashat Teztaveh, “On the Priesthood, Or: Holiness is Living in the Fullness of Life,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/priesthood>.

<sup>7</sup> “Who will dwell in your holy mountain (Temple)? One who walks uprightly, acts justly, speaks the truth... does not slander...” (Psalm 15:2ff). For more on the model of the Temple as a place of perfection / a paradise, see Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, pp. 137-142.



when one walks out of the Temple or re-enters the weekday, one sees with fresh eyes all the flaws, the missing qualities, the compromises of the present. Energized by the taste of the messianic, the religious celebrant determines not to settle for the status quo but to change it.

This is the covenantal method of world transformation which the Torah portion holds up as twin tracks on the way to *tikkun olam*, world repair. Start by redeeming one day, then widen the liberation steadily into Sunday, Monday—until all seven days are perfected. Start with one ideal building, then extend it to one city, then into one country. Keep on extending the zone of life, freedom, perfection, get some allies along the way, and some day the whole world will be redeemed, a Garden of Eden with liberty and justice, love and peace for all.

