

Vayakhel 5779
Top Priority: Not to Do, But to Be
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As this week's *parashah* begins, one quickly sees the energetic zeal with which our biblical ancestors get to work fulfilling God's instructions for building the and furnishing the *Mishkan*--the Tabernacle in the wilderness. They collect overabundant contributions for each aspect of the work, and artisans busy themselves fulfilling every specification to build a home for God in their midst. It would be easy to miss the injunction that comes at the beginning of today's *parashah*, the brief but game-changing command:

"וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת-כָּל-עֵדֻת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֵתֶם:

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים יַעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִהְיֶה לָכֶם קֹדֶשׁ שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן לַיהוָה

כָּל-הָעֹשֶׂה בּוֹ מְלָאכָה יוּמָת:

“Moses then convoked the whole Israelite community and said to them: These are the things that the LORD has commanded you to do: On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.”

(Exodus 35:1-2)

The remainder of the *parashah* depicts work undertaken according to God's command. But first, the Israelites must remember not to work, but to live in Shabbat--on peril of death.

As a person who gets quite a great many tasks done each week, as one who tends to overprogram herself out of earnestness to serve and, perhaps, a somewhat overactive sense of urgency, I find this instruction from God almost startling. Not surprisingly, the great commentator Ibn Ezra has the same reaction, noting how remarkable it is that with so much service to God waiting to be done, God's utmost and crucial priority is that we remember to *refrain* from work.

I am almost tempted to find it patronizing. After all, should not I be the master of my own time? And should not I determine which activities are appropriate, even which activities bring me a sense of respite from the demands of a dedicated life?

These are not new questions for me, nor, I imagine, for you. As a teenager, for example, it played out like this: I enjoyed creative writing (I still do). Like many teens, my weeks were full of school, extra-curricular activities, and a part-time job. Shabbat was the one stretch of time that was not programmed outside of Shabbat meals and going to services with my family. In my home we were not supposed to write on Shabbat, in accordance with *halachah* (Jewish law), but there was a time when I would take refuge in my room, filling a fabric-covered, blank book with existential angst and the occasional joyful muse. I rationalized: "It's not really work; in fact, for me, writing is a coveted pleasure that helps me to achieve some of the ends of Shabbat"--contemplation, reflection, and quiet from the demands of my busy life."

Now, I like to think that I am a reasonable person and that the Jewish tradition I love so much makes sense, at least most of the time. So what is

the deal with Shabbat and the concept of work? And more broadly, what are we trying to accomplish through the laws and practices concerning work--or refraining from it--on Shabbat?

The first thing we must understand is that there is more than one Hebrew word for what we call "work" in English. There is "*avodah*" and there is "*m'lachah*," and they are not the same thing. The word "*avodah*" can mean *service*," and it can mean *labor*. The kind of work we did for Pharaoh is "*avodah*;" the word "*eved*," slave, shares the same root.

The kind of work that is prohibited on Shabbat is called *m'lachah*. That is a much more nuanced word, a biblical word primarily concerned with creating and/or destroying things--tampering with the natural world. The only exception--because there must always be an exception--is the prohibition against moving items from one domain to another, which is included among what are known as the "39 *m'lachot*." There is rabbinic dispute as to the actual number and how to count them, but the *m'lachot* come from the last two week's, next week's, and today's Torah portions and derive from the various activities involved in building and furnishing the *Mishkan*. In some cases, what is prohibited today corresponds directly to the *m'lachot* involved in the construction of the *Mishkan*; in other cases, activities are prohibited because they likely would lead a person to do one of those explicitly forbidden activities of building or destroying.

In that the *m'lachot* involved in the *Mishkan* are made possible by voluntary donations and completed with skill, artfulness, and dedication, *m'lachah* implies a certain agency and dignity. *M'lachah* is the same word the Torah uses to describe God's own work of Creation in the Genesis narratives.

Contemporary biblical commentator Moshe Sokolow confirms that *m'lachah* implies work done by an independent agent, with a measure of equality between the principal and the agent, whereas *avodah* implies the subordination of the laborer to a master. Furthermore, he advises, one who

engages in *melachah* commits to completing a task guided and informed by his own experience and expertise, whereas one who performs *avodah* only follows instructions, like a servant.

Clearly the issue is not the difficulty of the work so much as its nature.

The Book of Exodus sees our biblical ancestors on a journey from *avodah* to *m'lachah*. *Avodah* is not something we need to contend with today--we are not slaves, but *m'lachah* is an ever-present reality for people of privilege, people who are liberated and have agency and talent to bring to this world.

And so it is quite profound that what Shabbat calls us to do is to exchange our own agency as people who create and destroy things, for a different kind of agency, a different way to apply our being in the world.

The idea is that on Shabbat, we leave things as they are. We enter into Creation, and time takes on a different quality. We are not supposed to wear a watch, because we are not supposed to be concerned with what time it is on Shabbat. We suspend time as we know it.

And we suspend our impulse to get things done. Only when I refrained from writing on those Shabbat evenings did I truly surrender to a reality beyond myself and make room for the Divine Presence manifest within me more brightly.

In an online article published this week by Sinai and Synapses, the organization sponsoring our Scientists in Synagogues initiative, Dr. Peter R. Saulson, a physicist, writes about "time as an enigma and as a source of meaning." Saulson contrasts the difference between time as we experience it in our ordered lives, flowing from one moment to the next, to what we have learned through scientific discovery about the nature of time.

"Contrary to everyday experience," he writes, "time may not flow at all. Our

past may not be gone; our future may already exist.” And, while he acknowledges the nearly universal belief among working physicists today is that we have no way of making sense, within physics, of the passage of time, he also calls us to pay attention to what Einstein teaches us: that reality is much more than ordered sets of events happening at certain moments; in fact, the universe does not actually work that sequential way. Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity forced physicists into a recognition of how alien was the concept of the flow of time to the rest of physics. The science of all of this is way beyond me and this *d’var*, but the point I take from it is that in reality, the objective world simply *IS*, it does not *happen*.

With that in mind, suddenly, it seems like it should melt away the urgency of all of the tasks I feel I must get done. And yet the fact remains that we live in a constructed world for six days a week. Here’s the magic: for one, precious day, our tradition calls us to put all of those things that need to happen in our constructed world off to the side--make them “*muktzeh*,” cornered, out of focus and off limits, so that we can be with reality as it truly is.

Another scientist, a critic of Einstein named Henri Bergson, seeks to locate the human experience within whatever time may or may not mean. He writes: “There is one reality, at least, which we all seize from within, by intuition and not by simple analysis. It is our own personality in its flowing through time – our self which endures” (from *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1903). I like that idea. It feels like what the Jewish people are trying to access when we make Shabbat a different kind of place for us to live in time.

Saulson goes on, aptly to quote Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel, and I follow his thinking here:

“Time is like an eternal burning bush. Though each instant must vanish to open the way to the next one, time itself is not consumed. Time has independent ultimate significance; it is of more majesty and more provocative of awe than even a sky studded with stars.

“We can only solve the problem of time through sanctification of time. Eternity is not perpetual future but perpetual presence...This is the meaning of existence: To reconcile liberty with service.”

Or, in my words, we find true freedom when we step out of our dedicated lives and daily responsibilities, to reconnect with the essence of all that is and commit to what matters most in building lives of meaning.

That is not easy to do, and it cannot be done in a few hours. Shabbat is a process that gently unfolds over the course of an entire, fully lived day, as we live in the rhythm of the sun setting, rising, and setting again.

It's been another busy week and I need Shabbat viscerally and deeply. As tempting as it would be to use these 25 hours as an opportunity to catch up on errands and uncompleted tasks, I know that my soul--in fact, my entire being--needs something else.

Maybe some of you feel the same way, if not this week, then other weeks.

And here's another key to understanding how all of this works: We need to help each other make Shabbat. Shabbat is something we observe together. We all decide, collectively, to buy into this other way of being. We all decide, together, to slow down and live in Creation.

A remarkable thing can happen when, more than fitting Shabbat into our lives, we fit our lives into Shabbat as a different way to be for 25-hours. What can happen is that the rest makes us stronger. It makes our vision clearer, our sensitivities more alert, and our capacity to bring a more expansive consciousness and a bit of Divine grace into the rest of the week.

It has been such a difficult month and a painfully sad week in the political and cultural landscapes of the United States and Israel. This moment, this Shabbat, calls us to remember what it means to peel back the layers of verbiage and constant bombardment of information we experience all week, and feel the truth of our lives. This Shabbat calls us to hear our hearts cry out for the love that we need, to let our eyes see the beauty of human life, to witness the created world that seems so incredibly vulnerable at this time. Shabbat is a technology we have uncovered and refined, the sharpest tool I know, that helps us build our capacity to make our best and most essential lives a reality.

May that be God's will, and ours.