



## Parashat Vayakhel: The Calm Before the Action

Dear Friends,

Moshe comes down from Mount Sinai for the second time. The second set of tablets are in his hands, man-made, human. He gathers all of Bnei Yisrael (giving the parasha its name, Vayakhel, “and he gathered”) and shares with them a little of what God has told him in their intimate encounter on the Mountain.

He does not tell them the most interesting details, and rightly so: like us, they are unable to hear everything. So it was, for example, with the profound and magical exchange about belief - perhaps the deepest in the entire Tanach - which Moshe had with God in the previous parasha. He did not relate any of it!

Before Moshe instructs them regarding the building of the Mishkan in all of its minute details, he begins with the mitzvot related to Shabbat. He already knows what will happen. “You, humans, get all excited about life's missions, especially those instructed by God, so I want to warn you - Shabbat comes first. It takes precedence over all other tasks, over all ‘doing.’”

**“Moses then gathered the whole Israelite community and said to them: These are the things that the LORD has commanded you to do: On six days work shall be done, and in the seventh day you shall have a holy thing, a Sabbath, a ceasing, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.”**  
(Sh'mot 35: 1-2)

In our times a statement like this - whoever does not keep Shabbat will die - wouldn't fly. It would be considered backwards and coercive (and rightly so!). But this is why we're here - to remind ourselves that the Torah is not speaking in contemporary language. It is eternal and it is metaphoric. It brings the exalted truth, dressed in human clothing, and we are called to extract the deeper, meaning hidden within it. This is the only way it will be relevant to all of us - secular, religious, traditional, and unaffiliated.

Rashi explains why the mitzvot of Shabbat precede the mitzvot of building the Mishkan: “He gave them warnings of Shabbat before the instructions for the building

of the mishkan in order to tell us that Shabbat takes precedence over the construction.” The Shabbat takes precedence even over the holy task of building God’s Mishkan!

It is like a recipe book that would begin with “first of all, calm down!”

Most of us think that Shabbat is an expression of the basic human right to rest at the end of a tiring week in order to restore one’s strength. This is very logical - we first work and then, after earning our right for a well deserved rest, we can lay our head on the pillow. Not the reverse.

But Parashat Vayakhel is asking us to consider the reverse: first Shabbat, and then work.

(I admit, I love ideas that turn accepted thinking on its head. This is a path to freedom. Unequivocal truths are called “Mitzrayim.” Freedom is possible when we are able to turn the truth around and see that the reverse can also be true. This freedom enables us to choose the path that works best, for us as well as for everyone else (win-win). Try it at home. It is truly liberating!)

What is the reverse logic, then, that puts Shabbat before work?

If we look closely at our sacred texts we will discover that Shabbat is not necessarily meant for rest. It is not the reward that awaits us at the end of six tiring days of work. Shabbat is called “the source of blessing” (as we sing in Lecha Dodi) because all blessings come from it. All of our “doing”, i.e. producing and creating, stem from the depths of “being”, from the expanse of the eternal, a place of profound quiet.

Most of us, when feeling stuck, when creativity does not flow, make a serious mistake: we work harder, we try harder, we invest more... This is a very common error, and it is hard to avoid. When we are stuck our brain tells us: “Just a little more, hit the gas, we’re almost there.”

When the springs of creativity run dry, when everything appears stuck, the right thing to do is not to do anything, just to stop. Go to sleep or go for a walk, breathe fresh air; go out into nature, to the beach, to the gym; put a foot on the brakes, not on the gas! (Someone please remind me of this the next time I am in this situation!)

There is a story told about the American-Jewish writer Herman Wouk, who was in the studio when they were filming “The Caine Mutiny” based on his book. In one of the scenes, the production came up against a dead end. There was a dispute between the director and the producer and tensions ran high. And then, about an

hour before the beginning of Shabbat, Wouk shocked everyone by announcing that he was leaving the set and going home (because Shabbat was about to begin...). The director and the producer scolded him, but he insisted. On Saturday night, when he returned to the studio, the production was still stuck at the same point it had been when he left it the day before. Frustration was in the air. As soon as he entered, the solution presented itself to him. He suggested it - something quite simple, he relates - and the problem was solved immediately.

Shabbat is “the source of blessing.”

Shabbat is the expanse that is entirely “being”, and from that being all answers and insights flow. From the place of quiet the path reveals itself to us.

And who knows, perhaps this is the reason Herman Wouk is celebrating his 104th birthday this year - I just hope he thinks it's a blessing!

Parashat Vayakhel invites us to consider an ancient Jewish-Hebraic concept that is the reverse of all we are used to. Blessing does not come from the work we have done. On the contrary. And the day of rest is not a reward for hard work. It isn't even a break for rest and recharging our batteries. “The source of blessing” is in the deep quiet that comes before the doing. This quiet is the Einsof, the infinity from which all things come, all inspiration and creativity, and to which everything will always return.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha