

All Work and No Play - Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei

There is a well-known story about Christopher Wren, the celebrated English architect responsible for rebuilding London after the Great Fire of 1666, who was walking incognito one day in the city when he came upon a group of men raising St. Paul's Cathedral, a structure which he himself had designed. "What are you doing?" he asked one of the crew members. "I'm working," he replied, "Earning five shillings, two pence a day!" Continuing on his way, Wren posed the same question to a second laborer: "What are you doing?" he queried. "I'm cutting a piece of stone," the man answered, "Measuring it carefully and shaping it just right." Coming upon a third member of the team Wren inquired again, "May I ask, sir, what are you doing?" "Me?" the worker replied. "I'm helping Christopher Wren. Together, we're building a magnificent cathedral to the Almighty."

To some extent, the very idea of "work" is subjective! What, to one person, might seem a menial task or necessary evil for purposes of earning a living might to someone else seem a sacred act in service of the Divine; work is partially in the eye of the beholder with one man's drudgery being another man's delight. Doing things required by our jobs, even when enjoyable, are generally considered "work" whereas other tasks of daily living, even when unpleasant, are seen as something just a little bit different. And while "work" often connotes effort or exertion, many of us at times experience periods of momentum, energy, and flow that make even difficult tasks feel suddenly natural and easy. Work is not a particularly easy concept to define. And yet, the very idea of it – and especially its corollary, rest – are amongst the most powerful and significant contributions that Judaism has made to the history of world!

Sheshet yamim teaseh melakha – we read in this morning’s Torah portion, Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei, “On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord” (Exodus 35:2). This notion of Shabbat, one day each week set aside for replenishment, was revolutionary in the ancient world, the concept that all human beings need respite and renewal in order to function productively, that holiness resides not only in space but also in time. Our weekly Shabbat mimics the very first from the Book of Genesis, when God Godself rested on the seventh day after creating the world, taking a step back from all the work that God had done. We are to do the same, refraining from *melakha* for 25 hours each week.

While the word *melakha* is generally translated as work, this formulation raises a great many questions. Why is watching television, something generally considered pleasurable and relaxing, seen as *melakha*, I am often asked, while walking two or three miles to synagogue – a rigorous physical activity – is permissible? What is the problem with talking on the phone, listening to music, or baking cookies on Shabbat? Aren’t these leisure activities of just the sort that we might want to enjoy on our day of rest? And how is it that clergy members are seemingly allowed to work on Shabbat, teaching and leading services as part of their regular jobs? For many, there seems to be a lack of clarity and consistency as to what exactly all this “work” business entails.

I believe that the confusion over the concept of work has something to do with the way we understand the meaning of the word *melakha* and something to do with the way that we understand the meaning of Shabbat itself. While on some level Shabbat is, of course, about work and rest – about creating much needed space for quiet and reflection in the midst of a

hectic, over-programmed world – this particular paradigm is not unique to Judaism or to Shabbat. One can rest by going on vacation, by planning peaceful weekends, by creating downtime each evening after the work or school day. One can rest in a multitude of ways – by sitting in Starbucks or going to the mall, by seeing a great movie or taking a drive in the country. What Shabbat offers us must be something different. That is what I would like to explore together this morning.

My teacher, Rabbi David Hoffman, speaks about the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis, creation stories one and two, and the competing conceptions of humanity contained within them. As Rabbi Hoffman explains, the paradigm of the first chapter of Genesis is one of great creativity – an omnipotent God forms the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) and then makes humans *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the Divine image, making them – like God – creative beings. In fact, humans are elected God's partners in creation and commanded *p'ru ur'vu u'milu et haaretz v'civshuha* – be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. They are commanded to create life and take dominion over their physical surroundings – in short, to conquer their environments through powers of procreation and mastery.

According to chapter one, the animating posture of Torah is that human beings are intended to be creative – to bring progress and innovation and healing into the world all through their own agency. God could have made the world perfect, could have created a universe in no need of refinement, but God impaired creation in order to make humans Divine partners in God's enterprise of fashioning the cosmos. Such ideas are echoed in the Kabbalistic notions of *tzimtzum*, *shevirah*, and *tikkun* – the idea that God contracts Godself in order to allow humans

to repair the brokenness in our world through performing acts of loving kindness. The function of human beings is to be a creative force for redemption.

Of course there is one major problem with this first paradigm of Creation. If humans are so eminently powerful, then of what need is God? The danger of Genesis One is that it makes God only central at the time the world came into being – once the world has been formed and humans left to their own devices, of what use is God? To counteract this imbalance, enter Genesis chapter two!

In contradistinction to Genesis One's emphasis on human autonomy and creativity, Genesis Two instead emphasizes human passivity and dependence. Adam is formed *m'afar* – out of the dust of the earth. He is instructed *lishmor* – to tend or guard – the Garden of Eden rather than to subdue it and relies totally on God for sustenance, eating from those trees which God deems permissible and refraining (at least for a short while) from those which are forbidden. Adam is existentially lonely, lacking a partner, and so Chava is formed from his rib. Rather than being seen as invincible brokers of power, humans are portrayed as vulnerable creatures dependent upon both one another and God for emotional and physical survival.

I would argue that Shabbat is the temporal equivalent to Genesis One and Two -- it conveys with action what the Bible conveys with words. Just as Genesis One and Two are put together to show human creativity AND vulnerability, human strength AND human powerlessness, so too does Shabbat serve to remind us of the tensions inherent in human nature. For six days a week we glory in creativity – believing that we can control our external environment through medicine and technology, manufacturing and information processing. We live in a world where

everything can be manipulated to serve human purposes, where nothing seems beyond the limits of human imagination and industry.

Until Shabbat! I'd suggest that rather than "work" *melakha* should rather be translated as "creative activity" – it is our attempts to master the world rather than just enjoying it, our devotion to the technologically sophisticated rather than the naturally beautiful. On Shabbat we cease from creative behavior – from writing and painting, from spending money and using devices – as an acknowledgement of the primacy of Creation and its one Creator – God. In the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder of Modern Orthodoxy, "Man...is engaged in a constant struggle to gain mastery over God's creation, to bring nature under his control. By the use of his God-given intelligence, skill, and energy, he has in large measure succeeded in this. He is thus constantly in danger of forgetting his own creaturehood – his utter and complete dependence on the Lord for all things. We renounce...on [Shabbat] every exercise of intelligent, purposeful control of natural objects and forces, we cease from every act of human power in order to proclaim God as the source of all power." Shabbat is a lesson in humility – a reminder that humans are not omnipotent. For six days a week we engage with the world, bending it to our will. On the seventh, we revel in the imperfect perfection of the universe as it stands.

In our modern-day, technology-saturated and over-programmed lives, I believe that Shabbat is more essential than ever before. Constantly bombarded by texts, Tweets, emails, private messages, video conferencing, Facebook feeds, 24-hour news, and yes, even sometimes the archaic phone-call, we need a moment to disconnect and retreat, to take a breath and replenish for the week ahead. The sanctity of a family dinner without devices, of an afternoon devoid of

screens but open to possibilities of exercise, nature, conversation, sleep, friends, and more cannot be overstated. When work is not only something that we're responsible to from 9-5 when we sit in our offices but is rather an omnipresent companion, no further than a smart phone away, Shabbat can help us to create important boundaries and limits.

Yet restoring sanity in an overwhelming world is not the only reason to think about incorporating elements of Shabbat into our weekly routine. Technology may assault and burden us in a myriad of ways but it also frees us, allowing us to access anything we wish – information, entertainment, goods and services – instantaneously, from anywhere, with the mere tap on a mobile app. Technology has allowed us to customize products, purchases, and experiences exactly to our tastes and preferences; it has allowed us to make a global world small, to map the human genome, to prolong the human lifespan. Is it any wonder that technology makes us feel like paragons of Genesis One, as if there isn't *anything* that humans can't do, achieve, or conquer? This, too, is why we need Shabbat. We need to be reminded that there is something greater than ourselves.

And we might want to start small! Moving from the everyday into a spirit of Shabbat can seem overwhelming at first and certainly doesn't have to be accomplished all at once. Begin by declaring Friday night family dinner time -no matter what. Or make Shabbat an email free day. Try inviting friends over Saturday afternoon for board-games or a long walk rather than meeting up at a restaurant. Bake challah with your kids Friday afternoon. Open up a great bottle of wine. Read. Nap. Meditate. Take a deep breath and just be. Remind yourself that for all the great many things that we humans can do, we can't do absolutely everything.

Sheshet yamim teaseh melakha – “On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord.” Wishing us all a day of sacred pause!

Shabbat Shalom!