



Rabbi Katz's Drashah for Bereishit

October 16, 2020 - 28 Tishrei 5781

The holidays can be exhausting. One might think that davening, eating, and sleeping over and over again sounds refreshing, but after the roller coaster of cooking, preparing, mitzvah-fulfilling, and emotion-investing, we could all use a return to routine living. In a sense, we're taking a break from the hustle and bustle... at least for those who have successfully stored away their Sukkot by now. In contrast, some might feel even busier now, but in a different way. Those who work in secular environments might have taken a bunch of days off for the Yomim Tovim, and now they have a lot to catch up on. Those who work for themselves or on commission might have a lot of ground to make up to meet their monthly goals. Not to worry, however, we still have Shabbos.

“And Hashem finished all of the work He did on the seventh day” (2:2). While colloquially, we understand this pasuk to mean that He finished everything *by* the seventh day, we know that the Torah is written more deliberately. Rashi asks about the internally-contradictory phrase and gives two answers: First, Hashem finished everything right up until the very last moment. To us, our perception of time vis-a-vis the sun and/or moon is much less exact. We may think that Hashem actually completed the work on the seventh, and the Torah is speaking to that perception. Alternatively, Rashi quotes from the Midrash that the last element of creation -which was only introduced on the seventh day- was rest. It was this that He “did” on Shabbos.

Taking Rashi's explanation literally, we find an interesting understanding of “rest”. We tend to think of rest not as what it *is*, but usually as what it *isn't*. “Rest” is when one is *not working*. When the pasuk says “Hashem finished *all of the work...*”, however, we're meant to understand that rest *is work*, that it is “melachah”. This leads us to another peculiarity, a good riddle for your Shabbos table: “Resting” is the only melachah that one is allowed to do on Shabbos. After all, that's what Hashem did when He created Shabbos- the work of rest.

Beyond its peculiarity, we also find that it may answer an interesting question from the Tosafot Yom Tov (Rav Yom Tov Lipman Heller, 17th century, Prague). The Mishnah, when describing the melachot of Shabbos, introduces them as follows: “The primary categories of melachah are forty minus one”. Why would what we know to be the “39 melachot” be called “40-1” instead? Perhaps it's so because there is a 40th, but it's not prohibited like the other 39 (according to the Pardes Yosef, Rav Yosef Patzanovski, 20th century, Poland). Instead, it's encouraged- to rest.

Conventional wisdom praises Shabbos as the time to unwind, unplug, and connect with the deeper, more valuable things in life- family, friends, and Hashem Himself. One might find an article online about the benefits of Shabbos in terms of “taking a break”, or hear a kiruv lecture about the pragmatic advantage of a “Technology Sabbatical” (a real term). But Shabbos is not all about taking breaks, despite the fact that they may occur. Shabbos is really about recognizing Hashem as the true Creator of the world, in times past and present. We express His exclusive Creative qualities by taking one day a week

to refrain from “creating” in the world, through these 39 tangible activities. But that’s not to say that “rest” is not work. In a cognitive sense, our rest can be more beneficial than we tend to believe.

Studies show that psychologically, taking rests from work allows our minds to process that which we’ve learned recently. While, on the outside, we may be uninhibited and free from our usual activities, it’s precisely that lack of cerebral overload that allows our subconscious to *get to work*. Have you ever thought of a good idea in the shower? Or “slept on a problem” only to find that when you wake up you can actually solve it? These moments of shut down are exactly what provides the opportunity for the backstage of our brains to make sense of everything it’s been too busy doing in the spotlight.

In a similar fashion, Rav Kook (quoted in “Gold from the Land of Israel”, p. 179-181) explains Chazal’s statement that the letters in the Torah need to be completely surrounded on all sides by the white parchment (“mukaf gevil”). We know, as well, that there are spaced-out separations in the Torah too- to the end of a line or at least several characters long of empty space between words and topics. This is not to say, simply, that the letters shouldn’t touch each other, but that the space itself is important. Reish Lakish, the Talmudic Sage, infers (Yerushalmi, Shekalim 25b) from what we read on Simchat Torah (Devarim 33:2) that the ink and parchment of the Torah which Hashem gave to Moshe was “black fire” upon “white fire”. In Rav Kook’s words, “Extra space is left blank to separate sections of the Torah. The Sages explained that these separations allowed Moshe to reflect upon and absorb the previous lesson. In other words, the white fire corresponds to the loftier realm of thought and contemplation.”

When Hashem “rested” on Shabbos, He did so not merely to show us how to “take a break”, but also how to unleash our cognitive creativity and maintain our mental health. That itself is an achievement; it, too, is “work”. It’s not the same kind of tangible, outward labor from which we refrain on Shabbos, but it is still constructive.

Today’s world has a strange obsession with being busy. We wear with a badge of honor the long hours we work, or how late we stay up to show how hard-working we are. We try to impress others by talking about how little sleep we get every night. But that doesn’t mean it’s better. Proper rest and sleep are fundamental aspects of our productivity- not only because it prevents us from being tired when we work, but also because it allows our subconscious to get to work. That rest *is work*. While it seems a bit strange, and it may be a radical version of this concept, Google sets up “napping pods” in their offices- not to limit the efficiency of their employees, but to maximize it.

So while we “wind down” from the holidays, and “take a break” from the overwhelming work we had to do to observe them, remember that we always need to take breaks- not just once we’re exhausted. As we start our new year of routine and work-life, keep in mind this fundamental part of work- that which makes you the most productive: proper rest. Schedule it, keep to it, and make sure you make the most of it... especially on Shabbos.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Katz