

This Week in Torah *Vayakahl*

“What makes a community?” This was a question that Rabbi Jack Paskoff of Congregation Shaarei Shomayim [the only Congregation Gates of Heaven that I know in the United States] posted on Facebook. The first answer was to the point—Shabbat. It made me think—is that the case? Hmmm....

The title of this week’s *parashah* has the root of community in it. Then the next verses deal with Shabbat and then it goes on extensively on the building of the *mishkan* in order for the community to gather. It made me think—why does Shabbat get repeated again here as an introduction for building a sacred place where God can dwell among us? Hmmmmmm...

Time to turn to the Rabbis and see if they can answer the questions! RaSHI of the 11th century started the search off to remind us that Shabbat happens whether or not there is a sanctuary. He added to that opinion by reminding us that nothing supersedes Shabbat—not even the construction of the Temple/*mishkan*. The 16th century Italian sage Rabbi Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno taught that one can be so excited to build a place for God to dwell among us that we forget to stop to observe Shabbat. The mystics among us would add to Sforno’s logic that internally our passions can motivate us to transcend Shabbat by doing holy work, but our tradition begs for us to remember that even God took a break. And in this week’s *sedra*, we are reminded that Shabbat precedes the building of the Tabernacle; Shabbat comes first! It made me think--- that is important to remember, no matter what Shabbat is the holiest time of the week and I should not take it for granted. Hmmmmmm...

The 20th century Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a book on this, called The Sabbath. In it, he wrote: “The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.” Hmmmmmm... in my opinion, that is a really good point.

Another Rabbi Avraham Yeshoshua Heschel of the 18th century [yes, they are related—our 20th century Rabbi Heschel's namesake!] took a *kabbalistic* approach. He spoke of 2 crowns of glory that were given to the Children of Israel, but one of them disappeared after the incident of the Golden Calf. But observing Shabbat restores it as if to make the people worthy of standing in a sacred place with God once again. The elder Rabbi Heschel tied the sin of Golden Calf to the restorative qualities of Shabbat in order for there to be purity of the heart in constructing the *mishkan*. That definitely made me think—hmmm... that is “very cool” in my way of thinking!

Now what is the common thread here? Well, look at my *d'var Torah* again and notice the repetition of certain phrases: “I”, “think”, “hmmm”... In order to have a true Shabbat, individual awareness and accountability for the Sabbath's sanctity are paramount. Shabbat is more than the cessation of work; it is the acknowledging the splendor and glory of God and all that was created by the Divine Hand. Or as Rabbi Heschel's daughter, Susannah Heschel, wrote: “The Sabbath is a metaphor for paradise and a testimony to God's presence.”

Let's circle back to Rabbi Paskoff's question: “What makes community?” When the individual chooses to join with other individuals to share sacred values, then community exists. When awareness of the soul is heightened by others that encourages an individual to ascend to new spiritual heights, there is community. When people understand that, then Shabbat is the gift that will build community.