

Parshat Vayekhel: The Beginning of Jewish Culture

Rabbi Rebecca Blady

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Our parsha is about building. Ostensibly, it's about the construction of the Mishkan, the famous wandering Israelite desert Tabernacle. However, it seems to me that the building that goes on here is not just about constructing a physical edifice. It's also about building a radical, full-on, counter-cultural way of living – the holy way of Jewish life.

Before launching into the nitty-gritty of Tabernacle construction, Parshat Vayakhel opens with a specific command, delivered by Moshe directly to the people, concerning behavior on Shabbos:

Moses then convened the whole Israelite community and said to them: These are the things that Hashem 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 Hashem; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the Sabbath day. (Exodus 35:1-3)

וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־כָּל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר
אֲלֵהֶם אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אִתְּכֶם:
שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי
יְהִי לָכֶם קֹדֶשׁ שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן לַה' כָּל־הָעֹשֶׂה בּוֹ
מְלָאכָה יוּמָת: לֹא־תִבְעֲרוּ אֵשׁ בְּכָל מִשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם
בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת: (פ)

It seems strange that the parsha, which devotes itself to an entirely different subject, opens with a principle about Shabbos. What does Shabbos have to do with the mishkan? Why single out just one prohibited act – the kindling of fire? And what is the connection between the death penalty, invoked here for violating Shabbos, and the Mishkan?

The rabbis of the Gemara, in Masechet Yevamot, devote a great deal of thought and argument to the concept of הבערה (kindling fire), particularly as it is mentioned in this pasuk. One of the more interesting questions that emerges from a complex, lengthy debate over this mitzvah is: What does הבערה really mean? Is it about the simple *lighting* of a fire? Or, given that the verse follows a warning of tragic punishment for breaking Shabbos, perhaps the Torah means to use הבערה as a reference to one of the four infamous court-sanctioned death penalties: *death* by fire? And if we are speaking of the latter, can we possibly say that the death penalty overrides Shabbos?

We learn in the Gemara a concept known as עשה דוחה לא תעשה: If we have two conflicting Torah obligations occurring simultaneously, a positive mitzvah (מצות עשה – “Do this!”) overrides a negative mitzvah (לא תעשה – “Don’t do this!”). In our case (Yevamot 6b-7a), we have two conflicting Torah obligations: One, a positive commandment to impose the death penalty on one who breaks Shabbos. Two, a negative commandment NOT to kindle a fire on Shabbos, which, in the minds of several of the rabbis, represents administering any form of death penalty on Shabbos at all. If we apply the concept of עשה דוחה לא תעשה, we would end up administering the death penalty (the positive mitzvah) on Shabbos, rather than follow the rule to NOT break Shabbos with fire (the negative mitzvah). However, despite this clear logic, the rabbis spend nearly two *amudim* (pages) debating this idea. The discussion concludes without a clear solution to the problem.

Clearly, there is great hesitation among the rabbis to allow death – particularly human-sanctioned death – on Shabbos. It seems to me that this hesitation stems from a deeply held belief that Shabbos – and this particular moment of Moshe instructing the Jewish people as to how to keep it – represents the genesis of a new culture. The *culture* of Shabbos is one that holds life in the highest regard, so much so that even a death that might come from a *Torah* obligation is prohibited.

But Moshe goes even farther to confirm this belief in the sanctity of life, despite all contradiction it might entail. As the Mishkan takes shape, Moshe’s language teems with life-building references. As men and women work together to create the beautiful materials for the Mishkan, memories of Bereishit come to mind. The walls of the Mishkan are named צַלַע, “side,” the same word used to describe Hashem’s construction of Chava from the צַלַע, “rib,” of Adam. Men and women alike are described in the words נָדַב לְבָם, with generosity of spirit, equally contributing their efforts and materials to the Mishkan. This seems to be an actualization of Hashem’s original intention for Adam and Chava to act as בֶּשֶׂר אֶחָד, one flesh – except this time, rather than Hashem instruct the people, the people are taking initiative to do this on their own. Quite literally, the building of the mishkan represents a creation of life, ritual life as well as an explicit call by Moshe to the Jewish people to make human life the most sacred thing that could exist.

This parsha marks a paradigm shift in the Torah. Human beings, members of the Jewish people, have officially taken Hashem’s commandments into their own hands and have begun to create Jewish culture. During the week, Jewish people may “kindle fire,” in all that that entails. We may have an assortment of priorities. We may pursue a just society (via the death penalty), use technology (that requires the lighting of wicks), create materials (using heat) and attach value to them. On Shabbos, Jewish people are prohibited from kindling fire. We must dwell in the world as it is, without affecting it, holding onto the value of only one thing: Life. Life, the very thing that Hashem created, the very thing that Hashem calls “very good” right before retreating in satisfaction from creating.

This is the Shabbos that Hashem has gifted us; this is the culture of Shabbos that Moshe has instructed us to keep.



Rabbi Rebecca Blady is the Co-founder and Executive Director of Base Hillel Berlin, a home-based, pluralistic Jewish community for young Jews in Berlin, Germany. For the past three years, she has worked with Hillel's Office of Innovation, first as a Fellow and then as Program Coordinator for the Fellowship for Rabbinic Entrepreneurs. While at Maharat, she completed rabbinic internships at the Prospect Heights Shul and ImmerseNYC. Rebecca holds a B.A. cum laude from Brandeis University and is a certified yoga instructor. A proud granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, Rebecca advocates for every individual Jewish story. She lives in Berlin, Germany.