

Parshas Terumah 5763

We read today about the הקמת המשכן, the construction of the משכן, with all its myriad details. And while all those details might seem remote, in fact they are relevant to us, as a matter of practical הלכה, each and every שבת. Because it is from the מלאכת המשכן, the various activities that were involved in setting up the משכן, that we derive the identity of the 39 מלאכות that are forbidden on Shabbos.

And so from the fact that the משכן required wool, which had to be sheared and processed, we derive that *shearing* and *whitening weaving* are forbidden on Shabbos, which is why we don't comb our hair with a fine toothed comb, or wash out stains, our knit, on Shabbos. And from the fact that the משכן required leather, which required trapping animals, and slaughtering them, and skinning and salting and tanning their hides, we derive that *trapping* and *slaughtering* are forbidden on Shabbos, which is why we don't swat flies on Shabbos. From the various activities that were necessary to prepare the tapestries in the משכן we derive that *sewing* and *tearing* are forbidden on Shabbos. And so on.

The Gemara explains this connection between the מלאכות of the משכן and the מלאכות of שבת on the basis of a Scriptural derivation. Perhaps we can add a conceptual explanation:

The משכן was a microcosm. Purpose of creation - that world should be abode for שכינה. דירה בתחתונים. The world has not yet fulfilled that function; but, in the meantime, הקב"ה resides in כלל ישראל, and in the משכן and מקדש in particular. So the building of the משכן parallels the creation of the world, and when we wish to demonstrate that הקב"ה completed creation - and "rested" on Shabbos, we rest from those activities that are associated with הקמת המשכן.

And therefore, by resting on שבת, and by expressing that rest in terms of מלאכות המשכן, we assert - not only הקב"ה's mastery of creation but, also, our conception of what creation - what the world - is, or, at least, ought to be; namely, the משכן writ large, an abode for the שכינה.

The message of שבת is especially important in an age when man has come so far in mastering his environment, in taming the forces of nature, that it is possible for him to forget to whom creation really belongs; and where society has become so secularized that it is possible to forget for what great sacred purpose the world was designed.

In that sense I think that there was special significance and special poignance in the late Col. Ramon's expressed desire to observe Shabbos while in space. Col. Ramon, זכרונו לברכה, was not an observant Jew. But he had the sensitivity and the Jewish pride to recognize that as the first Israeli astronaut he represented, in the eyes of the world, the Jewish people; he was our ambassador to space. And therefore he felt it appropriate to observe, at least while on that ambassadorship, the most sacred practices of our people. It is greatly to his credit. It is a great deal more than many secular leaders have done.

And there was a special significance to the idea of keeping Shabbos on board the space shuttle, in that symbol - that former symbol - of man's power and dominion over nature. There, דוקא there, to proclaim that it is not man, after all, but the רבשיי who is אדון כל הארץ. What a fantastic קידוש השם!

But there is another lesson here, which I would be remiss in not pointing out. Last week the press reported that in the event, Col. Ramon was so caught up in his work aboard the shuttle that he forgot all about Shabbos. I don't wish to criticize him for that; he was not used to keeping Shabbos, and so it slipped his mind. But there is a great מוסר השכל for us. Because, as we now know, that Shabbos was the last full Shabbos of Col. Ramons' life. For most of his life he did not observe Shabbos. But imagine if he had observed that last full שבת of life there, in space, with - literally - all of humanity watching. What a זכות that would have been! What a מצוה to have taken with him to עולם האמת. What an opportunity, lost in a moment of היסח הדעת, of forgetfulness.

Certainly, had he known that this would be the last full שבת of his life, he would not have forgotten.

And what a מוסר השכל that is for us.

- What a reminder that we don't have an unlimited supply of days to squander.
- What a reminder of the truth of חז"ל's dictum: ושוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך, do *teshuvah* the day before you die - which means every day, because no man knows when his time will come.
- What a reminder that when a מצוה comes our way, to grab it with both hands, because it may not come our way again.
- What a reminder that when an opportunity for קידוש השם comes our way, that we should not squander it.
- What a reminder of the preciousness and infinite worth of every single day, and every single Shabbos.

As for Col. Ramon, there were still the few hours that he lived into the next Shabbos; perhaps he remembered then; I would like to think so. And, in any event, certainly he takes with him the זכות of having participated in the bombing of the nuclear reactor in Iraq, and who can calculate how many lives that saved, and who can measure the greatness of זכות?.

Nor can we reckon what other merit a good and very brave man takes with him on his final journey. Nor, for that matter, what merit six other brave men and women take with them on theirs.

It remains for us to honor their memory, and to remember that however high man soars, he can never fly higher than into the embrace of the עולם של רבונו, as the משורר said long ago: כי אסק שמים שם אתה... אשא כנפי שחר אשכנה באחרית ים גם שם ידך תנחני ותאחזני ימינך.

Though I soar to heaven, there I will find you... If I don the wings of morning and dwell at the ends of the sea, there too Your hand will guide me, and your right hand shall hold me.