

VAYAKHEL (EXODUS 35:1-38:20)

The King's Day Off

2006 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

What's wrong with driving on Saturday? If G-d doesn't want me to work, fine, I'll take off from work. I'll spend a pleasant day with the family. We'll drive to the local orchard and pick apples. Then go to the park and have a barbeque, maybe take in a movie. Then we'll go home and I'll help my son build a tree house. What could be more relaxing?

In fact, work per se is not prohibited on Shabbos. This week's Torah Portion opens with an important warning:

Moses assembled the entire Israelite community and said to them, "These are the words that G-d has commanded you to do. On six days, MELOCHAH may be done, but the seventh day shall be holy for you, a day of rest for G-d..." (Exodus, 35:1-2)

The issue is *MELOCHAH*. To quote the Fifth Commandment:

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. For six days you may work and do all of your MELOCHAH, but the seventh day is the Sabbath for G-d; don't do any MELOCHAH. (Ibid, 20:9-10)

The problem is not work. If you enjoy moving furniture around your house, do it all day. That's *AVODAH* – work. What you may not do, no matter how easy it may be, is *MELOCHAH* – CREATIVE work. What is prohibited is action that shows man's mastery over the world. We may not build, we may not cook, we may not use electricity, or ignite gasoline with an internal combustion engine.

(I suspect that there may be a connection between the word "*MELOCHAH*" and the word "*MELECH*" – King. *AVODAH*, hard work, back-breaking work, "*Schlepping*" work, is something done by an *EVED*, a slave. *MELOCHAH*, innovative, inventive work, is done by a *MELECH*, a king who demonstrates his G-d-given sovereignty over the world by causing it to function creatively.)

There are 39 prohibited *Melochahs*. These 39 activities were necessary for the building of the Tabernacle, the portable Temple that Moses built in the desert.

The above-quoted warning not to do *Melochah* on Shabbos is stated right before the Mitzvah to build the Tabernacle. Moses cautioned the Nation that in spite of their intense desire to build this miniature Temple and have G-d's presence dwell among them as soon as possible, they were not to build it on Shabbos.

Our Sages learned from this prohibition that any activity necessary for the construction of the Tabernacle is forbidden on the Sabbath. No more and no less. If a particular activity is linked to one of the 39 *Melochahs* that were performed in building the Tabernacle, it is prohibited on the Sabbath. If not, it is permitted.

My Rebbe, Rabbi David Feinstein, (Kol Dodi on the Torah, page 148) asks why there are no prohibited activities on the Sabbath other than those required for construction of the Tabernacle. Surely there must be other constructive activities, actions not required for Temple construction. If we're not supposed to do constructive activities on Shabbos, let's not do ANY constructive activities on Shabbos!

Rabbi Feinstein answers by pointing out the G-d did *Melochah* in creating the world:

On the seventh day G-d finished His Melochah that He had done. (Genesis, 2:2)

The reason our Rabbis emphasize that every possible *Melochah* was done in building the Tabernacle is to equate the Tabernacle with the world. The Tabernacle was a special place where G-d rested his presence. Yes, it was a very holy place. But it was also a very physical place. It was built by human hands. Wood was cut, metal was molded, and fabric was woven. It was a place that was built with human creativity. Just like your house, and just like mine!

The Tabernacle was built with 39 varieties of creation. The world, says Rabbi Feinstein, was built with those same 39 varieties of creation. If G-d is willing to dwell in one, He is willing to dwell in the other.

Your house can be G-d's house. Just invite Him in!

Have a great Shabbos.

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