



## *Dvar Torah, Va-yak hel*

Sisterhood Shabbat, January 26, 2011  
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A number of weeks ago, there were some very interesting stories in the news about the concept of autobiographical memory and the six people who had been identified as having that very special ability of remembering every day of their lives. They could tell you what they had done on each day and could even identify on what day of the week it had occurred, even if it had been thirty or forty years before. They were not asked to reflect on the vast majority of those memories nor did they seem to volunteer this information. Just remembering the events that occurred was enough for them and the scientists who were working with them.

The beginning few lines of *parasha va-yak hel* seem to diminish the power of autobiographical memory in Judaism by immediately highlighting the importance of Shabbat within the context of each week. We are commanded to have complete rest on the seventh day, and any of us who do work on it, will suffer harsh punishment. There must not even be a fire – either a literal one—or a metaphorical one—as in a moment of anger—because all of this would prevent the quiet thinking necessary to develop in the most positive of ways either individually or communally.

*Va-yak hel* then goes on to talk about the construction of the *mishkan* with its very specific and complex building requirements and the discussion about Shabbat ceases. One might ask why this happens. Since this parasha begins immediately after the sin of the Golden Calf and the renewal of the covenant through the *shne loochot habrit*, the two tablets that Moses carves for a second time, does the giving of the covenant, the building of the *mishkan* and the eventual recognition of the people as a community and ultimately as a nation with its own laws, relate somehow to the Shabbat and the recognition of its importance—since all three events are textually presented around this *mitzvah*?

If that is the case, then how does the observance of Shabbat relate to the building of the *mishkan*? In *Ki Tissa*, last week's parasha where the building of the *Mishkan* is discussed for the first time, the *mitzvah* of Shabbat appears at the end after the furnishings and then the structure of the *mishkan* are described. In *Va-yek hel*, the order is reversed. The Shabbat *mitzvah* appears first with the description of the structure of the *mishkan* and its furnishings appearing after it. One might assume that the sin of the Golden Calf has necessitated a lesson about self-control, free-will,

vanity and personal reflection. By placing the discussion of Shabbat at the beginning, God and Moses can be sure that the people can calm themselves down from their highly egregious sin and exhibit self-control and reflection before they begin the task of building the *mishkan*, an activity that certainly takes a lot of physical as well as mental strength. Or possibly, God is requiring this rest because the people would want to work with great enthusiasm and without thoughtful restraint since they had just sinned and they knew they needed to atone. This is exactly what happens when, in *perek lamed vov*, all of the artisans come to Moses and tell him that the people, are bringing too many gifts, most of them precious things that they had used to adorn the calf. Moses stops them even though they were beginning to observe another commandment, that of *Hiddur Mitzvah*, which is the concept of beautifying or embellishing holy objects in an aesthetic way and derives from a verse in *Shirat HaYam*. The people knew about it and may have been trying to clear their sins through this new *mitzvah*. The problem for Moses was that the people were not evaluating or thinking clearly about what they were doing and without the reflection time that Shabbat would give, he knew they would not achieve the qualitative atonement that they were searching for.

In a much larger sense, this same kind of physical and mental strength and self-control that is required for the construction of the *mishkan* is also required of a nation as it evolves and develops its own culture and legal foundation. Is God warning the people that as they are also about to develop as a power among all the other nations, they must also rest, even if they do not want to. And certainly, because of the *mishkan*, something that would identify them to others in the area as a unified group, perhaps as a nation, they must be thoughtful in their endeavors so they needed time to reflect on how the *mishkan's* development was taking place. Shabbat would provide all of this. Additionally, the observance of Shabbat would appear to all of the other nations as a sign that this um, this new Israelite nation, was one that could show free-will, but with great control since it had chosen freely to observe Shabbat and could reflect on all that it was experiencing. This action definitely identified the Israelites as a highly developed nation, a force to be reckoned with to all of its potential enemies.

And if we look at the parallel narratives in the *parasha* which talks about the construction of the *mishkan* and in the *Haftarah* which talks about the construction of the *bet mikdash* in Jerusalem, as a metaphor for the cultural construct of a community and for our identity as a people, in an individual as well as in a collective sense, we need to be known as a people that can atone for things we have done incorrectly and can find the time to think about how to maintain the covenant. Prayer in the *mishkan* represents one way in which each of us can do these things,

but without the built-in time like Shabbat then, we cannot possibly hope to function at the levels we need to do this all effectively. Also, this lack of recognition of Shabbat in its purest form would suggest a spiritual kind of death because one is ignoring the spiritual dimension of life. And, if that is the case, then one must look at the Shabbat as probably more important than anything else in these readings, even the construction of the *Mishkan*.

And so back to my original question— is there a role in Judaism for autobiographical memory? Within Holocaust literature, probably yes, but according to what we are reading today I would say “probably not because one of the basic tenets of autobiographical memory—that all days are given equal value, certainly does not work here. Additionally, unlike the six individuals who achieved perfection in autobiographical memory and focused on their own memories, we, like the Israelites, are expected to think about the significance of each experience and our part in them as both the individual as well as the member of the community. Shabbat allows us to do that.

I do want to add one lesson I learned from my mother Libby Kaner who is here at Sisterhood Shabbat...this lesson peripherally relates to the concept of rest and reflection time and *Va-yek hel* catalyzed my recollection of this memory.

With four children close in age, my mother was always very busy and usually we were demanding her attention at the same time. She used to say to us, "Wait a minute...I only have three hands." Years later, when I asked her why she said that, she said that by saying "three" instead of "two," she gave her children some reflection time about where her three hands were—a sort of imposed Shabbat. In other words, it bought her time and gave us something to think about while she caught up with our needs. Pretty smart child management technique that I used with my children. I am now waiting to use this with my grandchildren...

Shabbat Shalom and Thank You!

