

IS THE MITZVAH OF SHABBOS CANDLES ONLY RABBINICAL?

Parshas Vayakhail

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The observance of Shabbos occupies a major portion of Parshas Vayakhail. Though for the most part the Parsha concentrates on the manufacture of the MISHKAN items, the ark, kapores and chrubim, the shulchan and menorah, etc., as a prelude the Torah emphasizes refraining from work on Shabbos. "Even work for the Mishkan" (Rashi).

It should be pointed out that this Parsha reiterates the details of every item that has already been explicated in Parshas Truma. The Parsha does not simply say, in one terse statement "all has been done as commanded". This is probably due to the thrilling excitement and passionate exhilaration of having the SHECHINA (Hashem's presence) among us in the Mishkan. Already King Solomon, at the conclusion of the Beth Hamikdosh, many times the magnitude and grandeur of the Mishkan, marveled: "Behold, the heavens and the heavens of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less then this house that I have built!" (I Melochim 8:27).

It may be due to this fascinating enrapture, having this LANDLORD-TENANT in our very midst that the Parsha repeats the details. This may also be the reason for the need to state that (nevertheless) no work may be done on Shabbos.

The Parsha continues with the prohibition of work on Shabbos, choosing one of the thirty-nine categories prohibited work, namely "You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwellings on the Shabbos day" (35:3). The Talmud (Shabbos 70a, quoted by Rashi) expounds the reason of this choice. One opinion is to extricate this particular work from the others regarding punishment for violation; lashes instead of capital infliction.

A second opinion states "L'chalek" it is singled out in order to clarify that violating even only one of the 39 categories of work constitutes Shabbos desecration, with all the negative implications. According to this opinion the question still remains why fire was chosen instead of any of the other categories.

Here the Midrash enunciates a far-reaching statement that it is chosen to emphasize that only on Shabbos it is forbidden, but on Friday minutes before sunset, causing to continue radiating the light on Shabbos, is permitted, "and not only permitted but a Mitzva". (Midrash Lekach Tov quoted in Torah Shelaimo Vayakhail no 30).

According to this Midrash, surprisingly, the Mitzva of kindling candles in honor of Shabbos, though of rabbinical origin, is nevertheless indicated in Parshas Vayakhail. (The title of this essay correctly ends with a question mark).

The Talmud (Shabbos 23a), after discussing various types of oil and wicks for use in the Shabbos candelabrum, as well as use for the Chanukah Menorah) refers to the Bracha "Blessed... and commanded us to kindle the Chanukah lights". It queries "Where in the Torah do we find such a commandment?" The very miracle of Chanukah occurred during the second Beth Hamikdosh, sixteen hundred years after Matan Torah. The question and the answer indeed apply to all rabbinical laws, which require a similar blessing. Yet since the Talmudic discussion revolves around kindling lights for Shabbos and for Chanukah, this question should have been asked about both these lights. According to this Midrash, however, the question correctly is not applied to Shabbos candles, which is (at least) indicated in our Parsha.

The fact, furthermore, that this Mitzva is indicated in juxtaposition with erecting the Mishkan betokens vital symbolism in connection with the Mishkan. The Menorah light in the Mishkan is taught together with the Shulchan (table with the showbread). These two items were placed in the Haichal in proximity facing each other (Shemos 40:24). Similarly are the Menorah and the candles radiating during the Seudah, partaken by husband and wife (and family) together, placed in position facing each other, "Asader L'doroma Menarto...V'Shulchan..." (zemer before Kidush). It is because of this togetherness at the Shabbos Seuda with the candles radiating, that the candles too are symbolic of Sholom Bayis (see Mishna Brura chapter 678:1). "Candles on the table where Seudah takes place".

The story is related that the Lubliner Rav, Reb Meir Shapiro visited the Chofetz Chaim in Radin. He wished to have his Friday night meal with the Chofetz Chaim. He asked the Chofetz Chaim whether the Rebibetzin would not mind to sit at a different table, since he, Rav Shapiro, coming from a strictly

Chasidic home, is not used to sit at a table with another's wife. The Chofetz Chaim replied he would ask her. Upon returning he said the Rebbetzin agrees, but he himself does not. Apparently this "Ish Halacha" felt that the Shabbos candles and its Sholom Bayis symbolism requires the Rebbetzin sitting together with him at the Seuda.

At the Pesach Seder, when the Seudah is delayed until after the recital of most of the Hagadah, it is customary to light larger candles, so it will still be lit during the meal.

Since the Shabbos candles are symbolic of Sholom Bayis it is logical that though the Mitzvah was given chiefly to the women, the husband, too, should have a share in this Mitzvah. And so is stated in Tikunai Zohar that the husband is obligated to prepare the candelabrum and place the candles tightly into it (quoted by Reb Akiva Eiger in Mishnayos, Shabbos Perek 2, Mishna 6).

Cleaning the candelabrum Friday afternoon and preparing the candles may be regarded by some husbands as being below their dignity, especially when one has kitchen help. However, as our Parsha indicates, with Shabbos candles in the context of building the Mishkan, one should feel uplifted by the task of preparation. In the Mishkan it was the task of Aaron the High Priest, who was commissioned to do both "Maitiv and Madlik", (cleaning the Menorah and lighting it). When kindling the Shabbos candles as a team, the husband preparing the candles and the wife lighting them, in the spirit of Sholom Bayis, they sanctify their home into a Mishkan where the Shechina dwells.