

The 40th Labor

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

A painter bends close to a canvas, peering intently. A writer crouches over a keyboard. A sculptor scratches minute lines and ridges in stone. Each dab of the brush, each keystroke, each scrape of the chisel is executed with utmost concentration, as the artist pours his very soul into the action.

But every once in a while the artist will pull back. He'll straighten his back, relax his limbs, even take a step or two back from his work to view it from a more distant vantage point. He'll disengage his soul from his work, so as to see it from the outside rather than from within. For a long minute he'll just stand or sit there, detached, even aloof. Then he'll dive back in.

Imagine that you wanted to put all the wisdom in the world in a single document—a document compact enough to be copied by hand from scroll to scroll, transported from place to place and transmitted from generation to generation for thousands of years. How would you do it?

You would, of course, pick your words very carefully, so as to take advantage of each word's multiple meanings. You'd construct sentences so that they can be read several different ways, again imparting multiple messages. You'd use metaphor to tell a story inside a story, a law within a law, an idea within an idea. If you gave each letter a numerical value and made certain letters interchangeable with others, then each word in your document will also be a code—actually a series of codes—conveying more layers of meaning. You'd also embed allusions in the very shapes of the letters, in the flourishes of the calligraphy, and in the format of the spaces between the letters, words and paragraphs. Finally, you would use context and juxtaposition to convey even more information.

That is what the Torah does by interjecting the commandment to rest on the Shabbat in the middle of its instructions on how to build the *Mishkan* (the portable sanctuary that served the Children of Israel during their travels through the desert). The laws of Shabbat fill hundreds of pages in the Talmud and many thousands of pages in the commentaries and halachic works; yet all is encapsulated in a few short sentences in the book of Exodus. A major source of Shabbat law derives from the association the Torah makes between Shabbat and the Mishkan.

“Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day shall be holy to you, a sabbath (‘ceasing’ of work) of sabbaths to G-d” (Exodus 35:2). The word the Torah uses for “work,” *melachah*, actually means “creative work”—which is why watering a plant is work forbidden on Shabbat, while carrying a heavy piece of furniture across the room is not. The Talmud lists “forty minus one” (i.e., thirty-nine) categories of such creative work, from “planting” and “plowing” to “tying a knot” and “lighting a fire.” Each of the 39 also includes numerous actions that derive from it (for example, watering a plant is a *toladah* or “derivative” of planting).

How does the Talmud compile this list? By examining the types of “creative work” involved in the making of the Mishkan. Regarding the Mishkan, the Torah is uncharacteristically elaborate. More than a dozen long chapters are filled with detailed instructions on the design and construction of the Sanctuary's 48 wall panels, 69 pillars, 165 foundation

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sockets, 26 tapestries, 169 hooks (59 gold, 60 silver, 50 copper), and its various “vessels”—the Ark of the Covenant, the Menorah, the Showbread Table, the indoor and outdoor Altars, etc. More chapters describe how the Mishkan was assembled at each encampment in the desert, and then disassembled and transported to the next campsite. By juxtaposing the laws of Shabbat with the laws of the Mishkan, the Torah defines the “work” forbidden on Shabbat as the work of making the Mishkan.

The chassidic masters add a third side to this equation.

The Midrash points out that when the Torah commands, “Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day shall be holy,” it’s not only telling us to cease work on Shabbat. It is also instructing us that for six days shall work be done. Working during the week is a mitzvah, just like ceasing work on Shabbat is a mitzvah.

Thus, in telling the story of the Mishkan with all its details the Torah is actually engaging in three narratives:

- 1) The details of the Sanctuary constructed by the Children of Israel in the desert.
- 2) The definition of “work” forbidden on Shabbat.
- 3) A definition and description of the work of life. Why are we here? What is our task in this world? What is the “creative work” in which G-d wants us to engage six days a week? The making of a Mishkan—a home for G-d that is created by shaping the materials of physical life into “vessels” that are receptive to, and expressive of, the goodness and perfection of their Creator. Want to know how to make your life a “home for G-d”? It's all there in the closing chapters of the Book of Exodus, enfolded within the detailed description of the materials, design and craftsmanship of the work of the Mishkan.

Yet on Shabbat we cease this work. Is Shabbat a time outside life? In a way it is, since we desist from the creative labor of life. Yet at the same time, it is also an integral part of that work. Like the artist taking a step back from his work to reconnect with his overall vision lest he lose it in his immersion in the details, so, too, “making a home for G-d in the physical world” requires a weekly interlude of unfettered spirituality, lest we lose sight of the overall purpose in our preoccupation with the materials out of which that home is being fashioned.

Therein lies the deeper significance in the curious Talmudic phrase we mentioned above—“forty labors, minus one.” Why not simply say that there are “thirty-nine labors” forbidden on Shabbat? Our sages explain: the fortieth labor is the “work of heaven” we do on Shabbat.

Building the Mishkan actually involves *forty* categories of creative work: the thirty-nine modes of constructive involvement with the physical world in which we engage during six days a week and which we cease on Shabbat; and the spiritual labor of Shabbat. The fortieth labor requires the cessation of the first thirty-nine, for this is the act of stepping out of, and above, our weekday Mishkan building; yet it is ultimately an indispensable component of the job of constructing a home for G-d in our physical lives.

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