Themes of Shabbat: Thoughts for Parashat Vayakhel, February 22, 2014

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This week's Parasha begins with Moses gathering the people of Israel and reminding them of the sanctity of the Sabbath. As they are busy with the construction of the Mishkan (sanctuary), they are not to lose sight of the overarching lessons of Shabbat.

The holiness of Shabbat is not observable objectively. Unlike Rosh Hodesh or the seasonal festivals, there is no clear pattern in the natural world which would indicate that the seventh day of each week should be sacred. There is no scientifically observable difference between time on the Sabbath and time on any other day of the week. Shabbat is sacred and special only to those who are spiritually attuned to its sanctity.

Shabbat is a commemoration of God as Creator. The Torah's creation story teaches that God fashioned the world in six stages and "rested" on the seventh stage. We symbolically acknowledge this process of God's creation by working on six days and resting on the seventh. Shabbat is an expression of our recognition of the original rhythm of God's act of creation.

On Shabbat, we are to abstain from 39 types of creative activity, such as building, plowing, writing, sewing, generating fire etc. These endeavors reflect human control of nature. For six days each week, we are empowered to mold the natural world to meet our needs. On Shabbat, though, we abstain from these weekday activities. We recognize, not just by philosophical meditation but by symbolic emulation, that God is the Creator and Master of the universe. On the seventh day, when we are not engaged in controlling the natural world, the natural world continues to be sustained by God's power.

Shabbat is not merely a day to abstain from certain kinds of activity. It also is a day for positive experience of joy, family togetherness, communal inter-relatedness. Shabbat is sanctified in the home with the lighting of candles before sunset, the eating of three festive meals during Shabbat, the singing of hymns around the family table. Shabbat is sanctified in the synagogue in prayer, study,

and re-affirmation of friendships.

Jewish law and custom prescribe that Shabbat must be respected by our wearing nice clothes, preparing special foods, studying Torah, and participating in communal prayer. By changing our daily routine, we leave profane time and enter the sacred time of Shabbat.

Rabbi Eliezer Azikri, a 16th century kabbalist of Safed, has explained in his book “Sefer Hareidim” that the three meals on Shabbat relate to the three major themes of the day. The Friday night meal relates to the Shabbat of creation. The blessing over wine at the Friday night meal includes the chanting of the Biblical verses describing that first Shabbat of creation. The meal of Shabbat morning is connected to the Shabbat laws as revealed to the children of Israel on Mount Sinai. The morning prayer on Shabbat refers to the Sinaitic source of Shabbat observance, as do the verses chanted before the Kiddush at Shabbat lunch. The Shabbat afternoon meal relates to the “world that is all Shabbat,” the future messianic period. This theme is central to the afternoon prayer which refers to God as being One and His name One, an allusion to messianic times when everyone will recognize the One true God.

At the conclusion of Shabbat, Havdalah (separation) symbolizes the return to non-sacred time. A blessing is recited over wine and over the fragrance of spices, herbs or fruit. Then a blessing is made over the light of a candle, indicating that we may once again create fire and return to the regular tasks of the six work days. The Havdalah concludes with a blessing praising God for having separated between the holy and the profane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, and between Shabbat and the six work days. The sacred time of Shabbat, thus, is set off at the beginning with the lights of Shabbat candles and at the end with the fire of Havdalah. The time between these fires is categorically different from the profane time of the rest of the week. But no one can experience that sacred time unless he or she enters it consciously and with spiritual awareness.

Shabbat is a magnificent gift which the Almighty has granted to the people of Israel. Those who observe Shabbat can truly appreciate the spiritually liberating significance of this gift.

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