

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Vayakhel-Pekudei

My grandfather was a great gift to me. He loved me and taught me, nurtured me and supported me. Whenever I needed a boost, there was Grandpa. When I needed grounding, he was there, as well. For all the other blessings or curses he brought to this world during his almost 95 years, Raymond Gittelman taught me to celebrate living, to always look ahead, and take a lesson worth holding and remembering from each engagement with another human being. In this fast paced world where people burn out right and left just trying to keep up, perhaps the most important blessing he gave me was the precept, "I don't care what you do for a living, but if you love it, it is not work." My grandfather was not a particularly religiously observant Jew, but this was one of the most Jewish lessons a man could teach.

As we draw the Book of Exodus to a close this week, we get hit with a series of "last minute" commands and reiterations of other commands. We will see the completion of the tabernacle by the artisans, and we will again be exhorted to honor the Sabbath. The rationale for Sabbath observance is manifold, differing reasons found throughout the text of the Torah. In one place it is to remember the Exodus and freedom. Another place, it is to remember the acts of creation. Still another place reminds us to observe the Sabbath because people need a rest. In the very first words of this week's Torah portion, we are told to observe the Sabbath ... because we are told to. The text is a little weird, though, The text tells us to make sure that work is done six days a week, but on the seventh, we are to observe a "Shabbat shabbaton -- a Sabbath of Sabbaths." We are used to this language ("Shabbat Shabbaton") in regard to holidays; especially Yom Kippur. This text does not address a special Sabbath different from others. Rather, it speaks of an every week occurrence. Before we even get to the command to observe, though, the text does not say that we shall work six days, it says in a more passive tone, that work shall be done.

The difference between doing work and making sure work is done is far from subtle. Certainly the community needs to function, but the perspective with which we carry out our daily tasks matters. If Saturday is to be a Sabbath of Sabbaths, the implication is that every day should somehow resemble the Sabbath. Shabbat is a day of holiness; a day to set aside the pursuit of power in favor of the celebration of being. Shabbat is a day to set aside the labor of work in favor of the renewal of the spirit. This being the case, if every day is to be a Sabbath, such that Shabbat is an extra-special Sabbath, we really need to rethink the way in which we approach each day. And then I recall the lesson my grandfather taught me. He understood this lesson all along. Whether it was tending to his law practice or planning the landscape architecture for Woodmont Country Club's luxurious grounds, both were jobs. They were more than jobs though, they were the work that fed Grandpa's soul. The work needs to get done, but, as though it was Shabbat each day, we are not allowed to work at making it happen. This does not mean that we cannot put forth a tremendous amount of effort, it does mean, though, that we need to feel blessed in the work that we do.

How many of us have jobs in which we feel blessed? This is not the blessing that we feel to have a job in difficult times. This is the blessing we feel every time we engage with our co-workers, the tasks at hand, and even through the challenges that make us remind ourselves that we are blessed. Where we have to struggle each day, the end of the week can never be a respite, any more than a marathon runner can claim to relax with a sip of tea after crossing the finish line. There can be no Sabbath if the week is truly

the rat race that we have to endure, rather than the blessing that we get to build on and enjoy. There is no time to restore in the one day, if it is spent just catching one's breath.

Certainly this is not most of our reality. Even those of us who feel blessed in our work, wrestle with frustration that takes us from our "happy places." We cannot, however, simply throw in the towel and admit defeat. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that what made the Sabbath sacred was that it called on us, even for a moment, to give thanks for being. It was a moment in time that needed to become a moment for all time. It is a life choice that we need to grow. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan was the guru of Jewish meditation. He taught that to properly learn to meditate one had to first learn to focus. He suggested that one started with maintaining the vision of the "aleph" in one's mind. He warned that focus would be impossible to hold until one is practiced, and that no student should quit because it seemed to take a while to develop the ability to focus. It starts with moments and grows to minutes, and then on from there. So should our Sabbath practice -- especially each day of the week so that we truly can celebrate a day greater than all others, and not just be thankful for a day away from the office. Shabbat Shalom.