

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Shemini)

Screaming and yelling; and then then freezing air when my blanket was thrown off finally woke me up; it was 3 am and for some reason the light was on in our tent; we had seven minutes to get dressed in full uniform and be outside in perfect rows of threes or... there was no or. No one wanted to risk finding out what would happen if we were not standing at attention outside when the sergeant arrived.

We had finally been allowed at 1 am, to go to sleep after an incredibly long day in basic training, and for some reason we had been awoken again a mere two hours later; I was so tired I could barely stand. And then ‘Sergeant Itzik’ showed up. It could not get any worse; he was a sadist, no doubt about it; we knew we were in trouble as soon as he opened his mouth, we just had no idea why.

“Did you check your pakalim?”, he yelled.

(Pakalim are the individual extra equipment charges each soldier had: different soldiers were responsible for the platoon’s stretchers, machine gun, shoulder carried anti-tank weapons, the radio and so on.)

One by one he checked out the individual pieces of equipment to make sure they were ‘ready for battle’, while his yelling got louder and louder. Then he got to the jerry cans: “Did you take care of the jerry-cans?”, he screamed.

He went over to the first jerry can and gave it a kick and the heavy thud of his boot hitting the full jerry can was the answer to his question. Then he kicked the second jerry can, and the hollow sound his boot made as he sent the obviously empty jerry can hurtling into the air is a sound that still haunts my dreams. I was responsible for one of the two 20-liter jerry-cans full of water (one of two in the platoon) which meant I had to make sure it was full and well secured.

Obviously the jerry can had not been filled. I could sense rather than see the dread that immediately descended upon the entire platoon. We were obviously in for a long night. I looked at my buddy who was responsible for the other jerry can who was thinking exactly what I was thinking: ‘I know I filled that jerry can before hitting the sack...’.

No way had one of us forgotten to fill it; we both remembered filling them the night before. It took me a while to figure out our commanders had obviously emptied out one of the jerry cans... At which point I really started to struggle with what it was all about and whether there was any point to all of this running around. Images of my friends back in college in the US were swimming through my brain as it dawned on me we were totally at the mercy of these sado-masochists with three stripes on their arms. What after all was the point?

This week we read the portion of *Shemini* (literally ‘The Eighth’), so named because the portion begins with the eighth day of the consecration service for the erecting of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle).

On this day for the first time in history, the Jewish people will have a *Mishkan*, which was the predecessor to what would one day be the Temple. In addition, it was also the first time we would actually have *Kohanim*, the priestly class. After all, before there was a Tabernacle or a Temple we had no need of *Kohanim* right? So one can certainly understand this eighth day as a holy day worthy of special ceremonies and offerings.

But why is it called the eighth day? Why not give it a name of its own like ‘Inauguration day’? Obviously the meaning of this day is only when it is seen as the conclusion of whatever happened on the previous seven days. And in fact, in last week’s portion (Tzav) these seven days leading up to the consecration and dedication of the *Mishkan* are described as a very special set of days, known as the ‘Seven *yemei miluim*, or days of inauguration.

And there was a special procedure each of these seven days as the *Kohanim* and with them the Jewish people, prepared for the inauguration of the *Mishkan*. And, it seems, without these days of preparation there would not have been an eighth day, or dedication of the *Mishkan*.

On a practical level, each day Moshe would build the *Mishkan* with Aharon and his sons at the beginning of the day and go through the daily service in the *Mishkan*, and then at the end of the day they would take it apart, only to build it again the next morning, only to take it apart again at sunset. They would repeat this routine day after day, for seven days, until the eighth day when it was erected and dedicated.

Obviously the *Kohanim* and the Levites were preparing for their role by learning how to take care of the *Mishkan*. But it still leaves us with the question as to why this was necessary, especially as this is something we find nowhere else. When we are given mitzvot we do not get a ‘practice period’ before obligation sets in, so why the need for this seven-day process, and why is our portion called *shemini*, implying the unique nature of this eighth day only stems from the seven days of inauguration which precede it?

So there is a verse at the conclusion of the actual building of the *Mishkan* which may shed light on this process:

נִתְּכַל כָּל-עֲבֹדֹת מִשְׁכַּן אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת-מֹשֶׁה בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹ:
... כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת-מֹשֶׁה בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-כָּל-הָעֲבֹדָה
וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-כָּל-הַמְּלָאכָה וְהִגִּיד עֲשׂוֹ אֹתָהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹ וַיְבָרֶכְהֶם מֹשֶׁה

Thus was finished all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting; and the children of Israel did according to all that G-d commanded Moses, so did they. ... According to all that the G-d commanded Moses, so the children of Israel did all the work. And Moses saw all the work, and, behold, they had done it; as the G-d had commanded, even so had they done it. And Moses blessed them. (Shemot 39:32,43)

Obviously, when reading these verses, one cannot help but be reminded of the verses describing the conclusion of the six days of the creation of the world :

וַיִּכְלֹוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל-צְבָאָם: וַיְכַל אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְכַל-
מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה: וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-יּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַיְקַדְּשׁ אֹתוֹ כִּי בּוֹ שָׁבַת מְכַל-מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר-בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים
לַעֲשׂוֹת:

And the heaven and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.

And on the seventh day God finished His work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made.

And God blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it; because that in it He rested from all His work which God in creating had made. (Genesis (Bereishit) 2;1)

Most people think that G-d created the world in six days. But a close look at the verse makes it clear that G-d completed the creation on the seventh day! But what was it Hashem created on the seventh day? On the seventh day G-d created **rest**: the ability to stop and consider what all the creative activity was about; what it was **for**.

What indeed was the *Mishkan* (and subsequently the Temple, the *Beit ha'Mikdash*) all about? Essentially, it was the paradigm par excellence of the impact the right environment can make. Three times a year we were obligated to stop what we were doing and take a break to go up to Jerusalem. And in Jerusalem in the Temple, as in the Tabernacle in the desert, we had the opportunity to experience an environment that was so special, so infused with meaning, so full of the beauty of the entire Jewish people coming together that one almost could not help but be impacted and moved. Indeed, this was **the** place where a person could really sense and feel the presence of G-d; where one had the chance to experience a sense of awe; of wonder, and hopefully be changed forever.

This was the eighth day, the day that stands alone (like the festival at the end of Sukkot, known as *Shemini* Atzeret: the eighth day which is its own festival) and is beyond the natural and above time. But before we can arrive at the spiritual heights of that eighth day, we must first experience the seven days of inauguration (the *shiva ye'mei miluim*) which remind us of the week, culminating in Shabbat. Because if the six days of the week are all about what we do, Shabbat is all about **why** we do it; it's about purpose and meaning, and making sure we do not get so busy with all of our labors that we forget why we are here, and what all that labor is **for**.

And if the *Mishkan* was all about attempting to experience a state of spiritual ecstasy, and connect to G-d, the seven days of the inaugural process remind us not to forget why we are building the *Mishkan*, and what it's really all about.

That empty jerry-can flying through the air challenged me to think less about **what** we were doing, and more about **why** we were doing it. This is probably the most critical issue of our day. On a personal level, we may have gotten the routine of what we do; but have we lost the why and what for? And on a National level, having built, with G-d's help, a magnificent State of Israel from a tent camp of refugees, into an economic and military super power; will the next generation stay connected with **why** we need a Jewish state and what its meant to be all about?

That is how we will get to the eighth day

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,
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