

## The Magic of Shabbos

Behar-Bechukosai

5769 – 5.16.09

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As everyone knows, tomorrow at noon there will be a city-wide rally in honor of Shabbos. It is also no secret that the background of the rally is the possibility of the JCC in Owings Mills opening on Shabbos.

The public desecration of Shabbos by a community organization is very painful; as is the possibility of fracturing a communal unity symbolized by long agreed upon standards. Abandoning those standards threatens that unity. This is a very delicate subject and we should be proud that the Orthodox community leaders and rabbis who have been actively involved in trying to avoid this outcome have acted with *derech erez* and class and their commitment and comportment has been a *Kiddush Hashem*.

I didn't live in Baltimore at the time of the last rally and unfortunately I will not be able to attend tomorrow's rally either. A wonderful shul and family simcha – my cousin is marrying the daughter of our own Rabbi and Mrs. Lopin – is unfortunately scheduled for the exact same time as the rally. It will be with great regret that I miss the rally but I urge every one of you – men, women, and children – to attend the rally. I will be in New York but a large part of my heart will be in Baltimore.

Let us be clear.

The rally is not anti anyone or any institution. It is a positive expression of love: love of Hashem, love of Shabbos, and love of our fellow Jews. Perhaps the rally will help sway the final decision; perhaps it won't. But either way, the *Kiddush Hashem* of such a large gathering in the name of such a noble purpose will certainly be a merit for our community.

In light of these events, all of the *rabbanim* have agreed to discuss the importance of Shabbos in their *drashos* this morning and I am happy to add my voice to this noble undertaking.

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The last words of Parshas Behar are, “*Es Shabsosai tishmoru v'es mikdashi tira'u, ani Hashem*” – My Sabbath's you must observe and my Sanctuary you must revere, I am God (26:2). These are very important values but their presentation in this context is difficult to understand. The *pesukim* immediately preceding this have been discussing the laws of the *Eved Ivri*, the Hebrew slave, and the commentators are understandably bothered by why the Torah concludes this discussion with an apparently unrelated reference to Shabbos and the Mikdash.

One possible explanation (the Seforno makes this basic point regarding Shabbos) is that because a slave no longer lives in his own home and no longer has control over his own time he might mistakenly conclude that the laws of the Mikdash – God’s home – and Shabbos – a holy time – don’t apply to him. The pasuk comes to underscore that even though the slave no longer has control in these 2 vital areas of his own life, he must nevertheless remain sensitive to the religious demands in both of these areas.

Not merely 2 very important *mitzvos*, Mikdash and Shabbos are also the prime examples of the 2 basic forms of *kedushah*, sanctity, in the world, *makom* and *zeman*, place and time. Judaism recognizes that certain places and times are more holy than others.

Both categories of *kedushah* are obviously important but which is more important, the sanctity of place or the sanctity of time?

Let’s consider the following story.

Once upon a time 2 great *tzaddikim* had a fascinating debate. The Voorker Rav was comparing the different *mitzvos* that are observed on Sukkos and he declared his preference for the *mitzvah* of dwelling in the Sukkah over the *mitzvah* of *Daled Minim*. After all, he explained, when you let go of the *Daled Minim*, you let go of the *kedushah*, whereas when you are in the Sukkah you cannot let go; the sanctity completely surrounds you.

The Kotzker Rebbe responded that while it was true that the Sukkah has this advantage, but, he added, when compared to Shabbos, even the Sukkah falls short; after all, one can walk out of a Sukkah, but one can never “walk out” of Shabbos. No matter where in the world a person is and no matter his or her level of observance, for those hours it is Shabbos. You cannot escape it; Shabbos is completely enveloping.

In a sense, the Voorker and the Kotzker were debating the relative benefits of the sanctity of time and the sanctity of space.

In praising the Sukkah, the Voorker Rav was praising the concept of *kedushas makom*. And the Kotzker Rebbe countered that, for all of its benefits, space can be abandoned or even destroyed, as opposed to time which is not physical, and therefore its sanctity can never be undone or abandoned.

This characteristically insightful point and sharp made by the Kotzker points to a larger historical truth. Over the centuries we have demonstrated that the Jewish people can survive without the Beis HaMikdash, but no Jewish family has survived for that long without Shabbos.

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There is something uniquely powerful and even magical about Shabbos. But I am afraid that its strength can also be its weakness.

When we speak about Shabbos the simple truth is this: What is magical about Shabbos isn't anything specific or concrete but rather something abstract and even invisible. The all enveloping *kedushah* of Shabbos is, by definition, non-physical and unspecific, and as a result, it is easy to overlook.

Those who *daven* "Nusach Sefard" recite, on Friday night before Ma'ariv, the following citation from the Holy Zohar, "*Raza D'Shabbos ihi Shabbos raza d'ishchadosa echad.*" The Nesivos Shalom alters the punctuation to add a layer of meaning: "*Raza D'Shabbos,*" the secret of Shabbos, "*ihhi Shabbos,*" is Shabbos.

The secret of Shabbos is Shabbos.

In other words, as we mentioned, it's not anything we do or anything concrete that gives Shabbos its potency.

It's not any one mitzvah.

Kiddush, candles, and challah are all wonderful, but they're not "*Raza D'Shabbos;*" I love chulent as much as the next person (trust me), but it's not chulent or kugel or gefilte fish or even a great nap on a long Shabbos afternoon. None of these, as wonderful as they may be, are the secret of Shabbos.

"*Raza D'Shabbos ihi Shabbos.*"

The magic of Shabbos is indescribable and untouchable.

The secret of Shabbos is Shabbos.

It is a sad fact that someone who has never experienced Shabbos simply cannot appreciate her beauty. It must be experienced to be appreciated.

But this recognition raises another – and for us more relevant – issue. Do we, who are proudly "*Shomer Shabbos*" truly appreciate Shabbos? Do we, who carefully observe all of the *mitzvos* of Shabbos and fastidiously avoid the prohibited *melachos* of Shabbos, truly appreciate the special *matanah* that has been given to us?

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The opening of Parshas Bechukosai – starting with the very next pasuk after the one we just mentioned – famously declares, "*Im be'chukosai teileichu v'es mitzvosai tishmeru v'asisem osam ...v'nasati gishmeichem b'itam v'nosnah ha-aretz yevulah ...*" – if you follow My statutes and observe ("*tishmeru*") My mitzvos and you fulfill the, I will give you rain in the proper time and the land will yield ... (26:3-4).

The material reward described seems wonderful – obviously – and yet it is somewhat surprising in that it seems to run afoul of the Talmudic principle that, “*sechar mitzvah b’hai alma leka*,” reward for *mitzvos* is not meted out in this world (Kiddushin 39b).

To resolve this difficulty the Tiferes Shlomo (of Radomsk) demonstrates, through other citations from the Torah, that the word “*tishmeru*” can also mean anticipation or eager excitement. In other words, the *pasuk* is not promising reward for mitzvah observance – that must wait until the World to Come – but rather, for the attitude that accompanies mitzvah observance. When a person is filled with excitement and anticipates the opportunity to perform a *mitzvah*, that’s what will merit the reward of great bounty.

Rav Soloveichik once commented that, after much effort, the rabbis in his generation had been successful in transferring the notion of a “Shomer Shabbos Jew” to these shores. But, he added, they were not successful at creating “Erev Shabbos Jews.” In other words, not just behavior, but an attitude! Not just observing Shabbos, but being excited for it! This, apparently, they had in Europe – and they still have to a large extent in Israel – but we don’t really have in America.

The *halachos* are absolutely critical; without their observance there is nothing to talk about.

But it’s not enough.

To witness the beauty and to feel the magic of Shabbos, we need an even more ambitious agenda. Beyond keeping all of the *halachos*, we should affirm the spirituality of Shabbos with elevated *davening*, soulful *zemiros* at the Shabbos table, and additional opportunities for *Divrei Torah*, both during and after the meal.

Commitment to this higher standard transforms the Shabbos experience and, more importantly, it will transform us.

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I want to conclude by sharing a story that I believe encapsulates all that we’ve been talking about. Many of you have heard this story but even so, this is one of those stories that should be repeated.

Rabbi Berel Wein was once giving a lecture, during which he mentioned a well-known story about a teenage boy in the Radin who was caught smoking a cigarette on Shabbos. Many in the yeshiva felt that the boy should be expelled for such a flagrant violation of standards, but the Chafetz Chaim prevailed and requested that, instead, the boy be brought to his office.

At this point, R. Wein concluded his presentation by noting that, while no one knows exactly what happened inside that office, legend has it that the student never again desecrated Shabbos.

After the talk an elderly man approached R. Wein with a shocking revelation: “I know exactly what happened with the Chafetz Chayim and that boy and I can also confirm that the boy was absolutely *Shomer Shabbos* from that day forward. I know all of this because I am that boy.”

The elderly gentleman went on to share the details of the meeting.

“I was called into the Chafetz Chayim’s office and I sat down across from him. He took my hand in his and then he closed his eyes

“His eyes started welling and he said, in a soft, pain-filled voice, ‘Shabbos.’

“A tear started slowly rolling down his cheek and he said, for a second time, ‘Shabbos.’

“And then, a third time, the Chafetz Chayim repeated. ‘the *heilegah* Shabbos,’ At that moment the tear rolled off of his face and onto my hand.”

“When I think of that tear today,” the elderly man recounted while caressing the hand that bore the invisible scar, “I can still feel its heat.”

He concluded: “When I saw the pain that my actions had caused this holy *tzaddik* and when I realized how important Shabbos was to him, I understood how important Shabbos had to be for me.

This is what we are talking about. This is the power of Shabbos. This is the magic of Shabbos.

And this is what we must all strive for.

May we all merit to reach this lofty standard so that when the story of our community is ultimately written, it can be stated that more than just keeping Shabbos, we loved Shabbos – and experienced her magic.